


Amazing Stories: Emotionally Charged Narrative in Pictures

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STORIES WITH BITE At the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, one of Rosana Palazyan's embroideries in *Untitled* (1996) that detail the shooting death of her brother. Smneedham

By Benjamin Genocchio

Sept. 11, 2009

“Pretty Tough: Contemporary Storytelling,” the new show at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, is filled with work that is beautiful, craftsmanlike, meticulous and frequently alarming.

Organized by Mónica Ramírez-Montagut, the show includes the work of nine women, artists from half a dozen countries, all of whom use figurative imagery to tell stories—some personal and some about broader issues like warfare, the environment, intolerance or the challenges facing women in various parts of the world.

Tender, fairy-tale-like depictions are common, as in Kyung Jeon's series of delicate pencil and watercolor drawings on traditional Korean rice paper. They tell the tragic love story of a young Asian woman dressed in nothing but her panties. The story is loosely based on the artist's personal experiences, embellished with colorful elements of fantasy.

Kate Clark's sculptures are somewhat more detached, but equally successful as works of visual theater. The artist creates part-human, part-animal taxidermy sculptures to draw attention to our shared primeval origins. “Matriarch” (2009) is particularly unsettling, consisting of a human face attached to the neck of a zebra. It hangs from the wall like a hunting trophy.

Other artists have sought ways to accommodate and update traditional forms of art and crafts. Ambreen Butt, for example, conflates traditional Indian and Persian miniature painting with contemporary practices and motifs to create fantastic narratives that reflect on her experiences as a Pakistani woman living in the United States. Many of the paintings portray scenes of social and political protest, especially Muslim women protesting warfare and terrorism.



"Lit From Within" (2009) by Kate Clark.
Smneedham

Orly Cogan works with secondhand textiles, predominantly table linens, scarves, bedsheets and children's quilts, onto which she stitches and embroiders new imagery. The updates tend to be provocative, including scenes of gluttony and drug taking, couples fighting or having sex, all of which are designed to challenge social stereotypes embedded in childhood fairy tales.

Embroidery is also the medium of choice for Rosana Palazyan, an artist from Rio de Janeiro, where her brother was killed in a gun accident. For "Untitled" (1996), the artist collected embroidered white handkerchiefs from women in her family and then added her own stitching, the designs telling in sequential images the story of her brother's death. Seldom have I seen a more effective and poignant use of embroidery in contemporary art.

This is probably the first time I have seen the work of Liliana Porter in an art museum in the New York region, which seems extraordinary, given her seniority (she is 68) and the caliber of her work. Her art gives us pleasure, but, like a lot of the other pieces in this show, it also surprises viewers once they work out what it is about: her tiny toy figurines stuck in or cleaning up large spills of black paint on white canvases are a metaphor for domestic drudgery.

Female relationships, social mores governing women, and the burden of family ties are popular themes for Amy Cutler, whose simple, colorful pencil drawings are both seductive and repellent. Her works here depict groups of silent, often sad and sometimes exhausted or depressed-looking women in surreal circumstances. In “Multiplicity” (2007), a group of tiny naked girls emerge from the headless torso of a seated woman.

Equally surreal is Stacey Steers’s animated video “Phantom Canyon” (2006), in which the artist re-enacts the autobiographical story of a woman trapped in an unhappy relationship and her eventual escape through the Grand Canyon. The animation was filmed using close to 4,000 handmade collages, each of which evokes an event, memory or emotion tied to the experience. Together, they possess the kind of concentrated hit of good reality television.

What I like about Ms. Steers’s video, and many other works in this show, is that they are emotionally charged. Turning away from trivial gags and amusement, these artists take art to a deeper, more real place. The result can be pretty tough to stomach, but also immensely rewarding for those willing to make the effort.

“Pretty Tough: Contemporary Storytelling,” Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 258 Main Street, Ridgefield, Conn., through Jan. 3. Information: (203) 438-4519 or aldrichart.org.