



Islip Art Museum

PLAYabout

"Free Play" at Islip Art Museum, curated by Judith Page

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When my son was small, "free play" had very specific connotations - it signified the opportunity for over-programmed children to become, if only for 20 minutes, feral, wide-eyed creatures of impulse. Most of the little boys would race until they dropped, usually from an injury. The girls, for the most part (and you're not going to like this), would sit quietly and draw pictures or string beads. Left to their own devices, the concept of freedom was a joyful, intoxicating thing, tinged with an aura of danger. It was, in fact, the place that creativity happened, be it jumping hurdles or assembling mosaics. We're all a little bit older now, and for most of us playtime is a tamer thing. Yet the concept is crammed full of life and eccentricity at Islip Art Museum's exhibition — curated by artist Judith Page.

Ms. Page mentions in her essay that she was seeking art in which "the form supported the content; art that asked more questions than it answered...art that was inherently fluid rather than solid." She also specified that she hoped to see art that explored fantasy, enchantment, dreams and mythological worlds. Nearly everything in this conceptually explosive show fits her bill. Both Claire Watson and Abby Goodman address the concept by reappropriating recognizable objects and transforming them into otherworldly images. In *Metaform I*, 2006, Ms. Watson's gloved hand morphs into a busty torso that stands erect as if waiting for the next dance. Under a gigantic glass dome stands Ms. Goodman *Deerfly*, 2006.



The teensy tiny sculpture is made from a plastic child's toy—a doe that has been befitted with the enormous wings of a Monarch butterfly. Already dwarfed by the room, this diminutive deer appears beleaguered, done in by the weight of its mutant gift of flight.



Conversely, Ellen Brous examines scale in the other extreme in an oversized strand of pearls titled *American Idol*, 2007. The artist's polished orbs descend in size as they loop around the top of the necklace, opalescent and shimmering.

The galleries are filled with delirium and dreams. Faces and figures are secreted within baroque surfaces in Sybelle Trigoboff's *Ask*, 2006 and James Schultz's *The Sphinx*, 2005, a work on paper in which the unlikely Egyptian guardian hides in an urban jungle of brush and streetlights. Sculptors Roger Loft and Dan

Porcaro present works that seem blithely unaware of its own peculiarities. Mr.

Porcaro's *Avatar #9*, 2006 looks like a beating heart, aortic valves run amuck as if designed by Peter Maxx. Mr. Loft's mysterious and seductive wall sculpture has the appearance of a bronze egg that has been carved away by a giant watermelon scoop, its secrets embedded in those missing parts.

While the works throughout the show share a common theme, they run the gamut from the baroque to the post-modern. *Untitled (Garlic I)*, 1997 by Helen Rousakis looks more like a bleeding heart than it does garlic. Punctured, dripping and hovering mid-air, the central image is unfocused and indecipherable, as if veiled by cultural or aesthetic secrets. In Cynthia Rose's *Red Wings*, 2007, knitted ribbons of red yarn cascade across a birdcage as if bleeding from an invisible source high above, eventually melting into puddles of shiny beads.



There are numerous mixed media works that obsessively combine disparate materials. Glittery tendrils flail inside the framework of Janet Culbertson's *From Medusa's Garden*, 2003, in a wild midnight apocalypse. The figurine in Susan Pitak Davis's *Angel on the Day of the Dead*, 2003, is an explosive amalgamation of tiny figures, beadwork and buttons. The angel, childlike and beatific, is weighted down with leaden wings and the faces of hundreds of ghostly souls. Likewise, *Bunny*, 2005, takes a concept we associate with Beatrix Potter and turns it on its head. The only aspect of China Marks's

embroidered figure that is bunny-like is the pink ear that is being devoured by this menacing figure. Well, Beatrix



Potter wasn't so soft and fluffy, either.

There are google eyes and masked faces, skulls and tarot cards, vortexes and candy colored hills. Liz di Giorno enters the realm of mystery

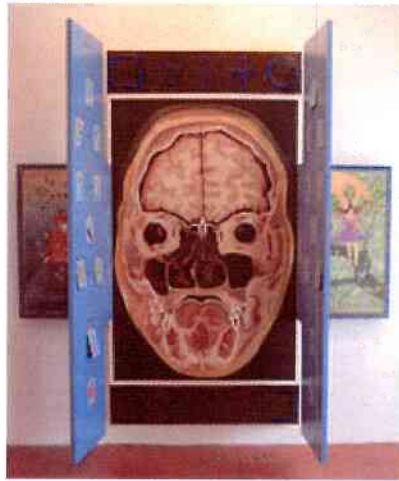


through the conventions of oil paint on canvas in her work *Untitled, (#76), 2007*. In it, the simplicities of grandma's dessert plates are introduced to a child's jacks that have been thrown carelessly on the dining room table. Jeff Hoppa introduces a weirdly familiar biomorphic form in his tondo painting *Squaw Tanks I, 2007*. The image, floating like a diamond in the center of the canvas, could have been lifted from a medical textbook for an alien life form. In Jongwang Lee's *Transcendent Evolution, 2006*, a perspectival red square blasts across the painted surface. In the center, the artist painted a toothy jaw line that struts into the foreground oozing viscous, rubbery goo. Like Mr. Lee and Mr. Hoppa, Catya Plate examines body parts as a departure point for her installation, *More Than Meets the Eye, 2002*.



Here, the artist enters the realm of clairvoyance and the sort of organized mystery typical of some of our more esoteric religions. Like a medieval altar painting, Ms. Plate equipped the work with doors that swing open to reveal an immense brain scan in the center most panel that stares out like the face of a religious leader.

Ms. Page has deftly managed to select works that celebrate myriad notions of eccentricity, obsession and the macabre. The tenderness and delicacy of Laurie Sheridan's *Release, 2003*, a monotype in which a floating mattress shape casts its unlikely shadow below, is set off against the strident surrealism of Joellen Vonouwerkerk's painting of adolescent jailbirds in *Leopard Girl Guarding Lizard*



Cemetery, 2001.

And then, Helen K. Burros reminds us of what you can do with a pen. In her obsessively animated field of lines in *Deep in the Woods*, 2004, thousands of lines swirl in and out of trees and branches. Figures emerge and just as quickly melt into a sea of scratches as darkness falls on this abstract forest and its anonymous inhabitants.