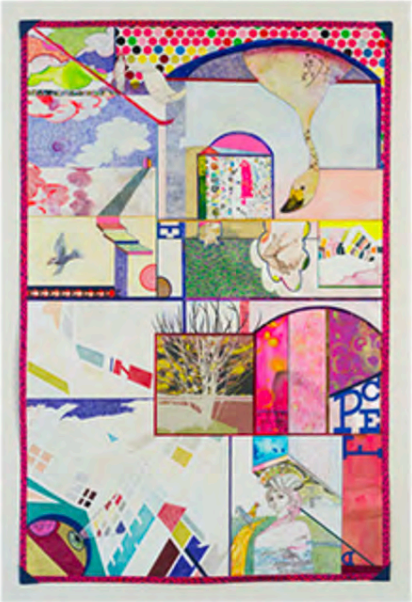
Glasstire
{Texas visual art}

Claire Cowie: Blind Spot



June 1 - July 20, 2024

From James Harris Gallery:

“James Harris Gallery is pleased to present our tenth exhibition with artist Claire Cowie. Her first at our new gallery in Dallas. Paper has been the artist’s primary material. Like much of Cowie’s past work, the six pieces in the exhibition use multiple perspectives and multiple points of view. Titled “Blind Spot”, the artist questions ideas of what we see, what we ignore, and what we think we perceive. Her deliberate conflation of positive and

negative space and intense patterning creates circuitous paths that lead the viewer through Cowie's personal visual archive which entangles public observation and private introspection. Along with direct application of pigment, she has repurposed her previous watercolors and prints along with pieces of fabric that embellish and enhance her work, a cacophony of referential imagery as well as abstract forms. Her work will be on display in our main gallery."

Reception: June 1, 2024 | 4–6 pm

James Harris Gallery

4829 Gretna Street #102

Dallas, 75207 Texas

Claire Cowie

PageBoy Interview

Claire Cowie lives and makes art in Seattle WA. She received an MFA from the University of Washington, where she is currently a Teaching Artist-in-Residence.

Due to COVID-19, this interview took place during the "shelter-in-place" order, over email.

PageBoy: Tell me about a piece of artwork you remember making as a child.

Claire Cowie: When I was little, starting around age 3 or 4, my parents would give me the red wax wrapper whenever they bought Gouda cheese. I would warm it up in my hands, and mush it around until it got really soft. Then I would make tiny animal sculptures out of it. I would keep them in the freezer so they didn't get too slumpy and malformed. But we would also pull them out for display sometimes. My parents still have some of them in their freezer—over forty years old now.

PB: So you began as a sculptor!

CC: I definitely began as a sculptor; if it wasn't the wax, it was just collecting stuff from nature or making clothes. One of the reasons I'm drawn to collage is that it is so much like sculpting, a process of building and removing material.

PB: That wax has universal appeal. I have visceral childhood memories of squishing it. How do you feel about that shade of red now? (Gouda red.) And what colors are you drawn to generally?

CC: That shade of red still always reminds me of that wax. I love every color … in its proportion and place. I'm most excited by colors that evoke strong emotions (good or bad) and challenge our expectations. I like to use a lot of muddled, mixed tones and then contrast those with a bright or saturated color. I usually think or draw in black and white first, to focus on composition and the armature of the piece, and then I'll add color. That probably comes from my background in printmaking and proofing. As much as I love color and the instinctual responses we have to color, nothing beats black and white.

PB: You're versed in many art forms, a polyglot so to speak. Did that formal diversity feel inevitable? Accidental? Does one particular form suit you best?

CC: In retrospect, it seems like it was inevitable. I've never had a personal hierarchy, and I prefer to mix up the processes (painting on sculptures, cutting apart prints, using sculptural forms as references for drawings or photographs). The contrasts and relationships between materials have always been more interesting to me than any one material on its own. So, collage suits me best in that it's a form that can be a mixture of forms. It is the most like thinking—taking many bits and pieces and trying to make meaning out of it all.

PB: Literary collage has become popular over the last decade or so. It's a form that can free the writer from working in a linear way. The literary collagist can print out a bunch of orphan material, cut it up, and move the scraps around on the floor, looking for points of connection, allowing unexpected juxtapositions to do much of the work. This makes the composition process physical, more like visual art.

Joe Brainard, who collaged with both images and words, described his process this way: "I don't ever have an idea. The material does it all. You have a figure and a flower and you add a cityscape and it makes the story. You have control if you want to take it but that's something I never wanted to do much." Do you relate to Brainard's comment about "control"? And can you tell me about your collage process in more detail?

CC: I can see the appeal of Brainard's approach for many, and I imagine it could be a good way for some people to loosen up, or back up a bit from their intentions. But I'm more interested in how much control it *gives* me. To start with "material" that has content/context/

Goodbye, 2019
screen print and pochoir, 15 x 11 inches

Meditation No. 10, 2019
collage, watercolor, acrylic, 12.5 x 9.5 inches
Courtesy of Elizabeth Leach Gallery

Self-Portrait (Blind), 2019
hard ground etching, aquatint, drypoint, 7.5 x 5.5 inches

detail from *Mind Map III (Capricorn)*, 2019
etching, woodcut, collage, acrylic, watercolor, graphite on paper,
24 x 41.5 inches Courtesy of James Harris Gallery

detail and to rearrange it and change it, and to see the possibilities before I commit to them—that actually suits the manager part of me. I feel a greater sense of control than when I start from scratch. I'm usually very loose and open-minded and intuitive when I make things from scratch. Later, when I cut up, or paint on top of those pieces, I feel I can exercise my authority and indulge in discipline.

PB: One of your collages, the one with the Mexican chocolate wrapper, reminds me of a fan caught mid-rotation, but a fan with lots of funky blades—some of which have sharp tips. It's not hard to imagine this energetic piece as a film, almost like one of Duchamp's rotoreliefs. What sort of vocabulary are you playing with in this collage? I'm seeing, for example, an interplay between round and angular forms.

CC: This piece comes from a series of collages titled "In the Vacuum, Outside the Atmosphere". This is a reference to a rocket's ability to continue accelerating as it leaves Earth's gravity well. I made these pieces while my best friend was very sick last year. She didn't want people to know the depths of her illness; she was a very private person. I tend to be a verbal processor, but I had to channel my own emotions into my work instead of sharing with people, in order to respect her wishes.

I was thinking about the rhythms and movement of the universe and of our relationships with people, our connections as well as areas of disconnect, how we make it *through*. The vocabulary is that of flags, holes, barbs, stars, fences, explosions, meditations—a clash of the cosmic and the human.

PB: As a viewer, I'm really aware of that cosmic landscape you're describing, that sense of planets and stars and void. What most excites you about this very personal series now that it's finished?

CC: I am excited that it brought me to a place that is both super personal and completely universal at the same time. While I was making the work, it was a kind of meditation and inward drama. Now that the series is finished, it has become more of a general reflection on death, loss, caretaking, love. And the commonality, the ordinariness of that. I love a void. It is scary, empty in the immediate, but full of potential.

PB: Death, loss, caretaking, and love are very much in the public consciousness right now, as citizens around the world quarantine in an effort to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The British poet Basil Bunting argued: "There's not a soul who cares twopence what I or any other poet thinks about the war, Nixon, Wallace, marijuana, pills, oil spills, detergent advertisements or the fog from Gary. We are experts on nothing but the arrangement of vowels and consonants ...We are entitled to the same voice as anyone else with the vote, no more."

What role do you think the Arts play in terms of responding to or commenting on war, impeachment, pandemic?

CC: Crazy times, yes? My studio has moved to my kitchen table, where I'm both painting and using my laptop on Zoom for teaching (we just got word that there are no in-person classes until summer at least).

This work, and all the in-progress work I'm making, has definitely taken on a COVID-19 overlay. We are all thinking about these same things together now. The pandemic has heightened our sense of interconnectivity, and for many of us, our responsibility to the greater community. For me (as a maker and a viewer), art engages with the complexities of life—it can be a reflection of society, and simultaneously, a vision of change. It can be contradictory, shifting, mysterious, empathetic. It can blend humor and tragedy, merge the specific and the universal, and bring together the individual and the communal. By nature, art makes space for differences of opinion and interpretation. My favorite artworks make me feel connected to things I wouldn't otherwise experience or understand.

PB: As a writer, I'm always envious of visual artists. Your work is visceral and immediate in a way that literature isn't. A poem demands time and patience from a reader, a story requires absorption over time as well, whereas visual work can hit the viewer instantly and make an impression immediately. Do you have any thoughts about this? (That said, in a project like the bright and beautifully playful one you made at the Nemhauser Biology Lab Residency, I see that you sometimes combine words and images.)

CC: I think all forms of art are more related than not—they are all expressions of how our internal thinking meets the external world. In terms of medium, I think artists often feel the grass is greener. In college, I wanted to be a writer. I had wonderful professors like William Gass and Carl Phillips, who were immersed in both visual and written language. I love to read, but I would find myself just not wanting to write, preferring to draw or build something. So, it was the *idea* of writing that I liked; the idea that I wouldn't need a big studio, to ship crates, to store tons of supplies, and that one well-thought-out thing could go out to many people, not just be seen by a few, etc. But, there is much joy in recognizing instinct and accepting a role that just fits. (I mean, I also wanted to be a dancer or a musician, but I was super terrible at both, so those are now activities that I can still have fun doing, but no one else needs to see the results.)

PB: Since he's a literary giant of sorts (and not uncontroversial!), I must ask what it was like having William Gass as a teacher?

CC: It was really terrific for me at that time; he was so excited about the possibilities of mixing text and image, and he championed us taking risks. He was both hilarious and demanding. I was all over the place in my own work, and the most constant criticism I heard from most of my professors was to "focus", but he would say, "Keep playing until you find it!" My favorite course I took with him was called "Philosophy of Architecture: The Window." I pretty much sat there enamored, holding my breath throughout the whole class as he freewheeled, non-stop, a great, spontaneous lecture, while showing tons of pictures he'd taken of windows from all over the world. It was always completely entertaining. He is one of the many people in my life that I had an easy, fun time with before I found out that I was supposed to be intimidated by them.

PB: That seems like such a superpower, not to feel (or know to feel) intimidated. My sense is that you lead with curiosity rather than fear.

CC: Ignorance is bliss and all that, for sure!

PB: Do you ever find yourself thinking about windows anymore?

CC: I think of windows all the time. I have quite a few paintings in which I have riffed on Matisse's general use of the window. I think a window is the most beautiful framing device; I love how the smallest shift in position of the viewer changes the composition completely. A window is so powerful in simultaneously dividing worlds and allowing access to them.

PB: I love the story of Matisse, when he was old and confined to a wheelchair, visiting a favorite swimming pool in the south of France to watch divers, then coming back home and asking his assistant to help him make his own swimming pool. He cut blue-painted paper into the shapes of sea creatures, swimmers, and divers, and his assistant pinned these pieces one by one to the burlap walls of his dining room. It's like he created both the window and the scene.

CC: I love that story, too! And I love the long, homemade drawing stick he used when he was bedridden. It epitomizes the need to draw and conceive one's own space as long as it is at all possible.

PB: Yes, that drawing stick feels so symbolic of the artist's will to create. As you look ahead, what are you seeing in your work? More collage? Or maybe you don't look ahead at all.

CC: I always have way more ideas and interests than I can actually get to, so I try to look only a little bit ahead, so I'm not overwhelmed. I think I'll be making some accordion books—they are such a good way to combine materials, contain multiple ideas, collect thoughts, and have a lot going on in a relatively small package—which is appealing now that we're all kind of cooped up.

PB: Before we finish, can you tell me about one or two artworks that really move you?

CC: When I was a kid, I'd take my mom's art history book off her shelf (all black and white images!) and look at the Goya etchings. That was the first time I remember feeling a deep, strong connection to something made by someone so different from me in a place and time so different from my own. I was obsessed with them.

Then in high school in the 1990s, a teacher introduced me to Roni

Horn's work and it hit me like a bulldozer. When I came to Seattle in the late 90s, I got to see Horn's Emily Dickinson sculptures at the Henry Art Gallery, and that work had a big impact on my own processing of ideas. I love how Horn and Dickinson balance syntax, structure, humor, emotion, coolness, and vulnerability. There is something really compelling in the contrasting of deeply personal, emotional impulses and formal, technical concerns. The work of dance choreographer Crystal Pite does this for me as well (especially seen in-person, live); there is catharsis as well as craftsmanship, a personal aesthetic and a collective force. She is earnest as well as funny, and attends to both the big picture and the tiny details.

Once, Jason Hirata stuck a fork in the wall of a gallery and I loved it so much it makes me happy just to remember it. Jeffrey Simmons' watercolors on paper are mesmerizing. Of course, I am moved every day by the art my daughter makes.

PB: What an exciting gathering of work! In and of itself, this list feels so textured, like a sort of collage. Has your daughter followed in your inspired gouda-sculpture footsteps?

CC: My daughter definitely follows the pattern of making things out of whatever she finds. Like many kids, she has a magic touch with recycling materials, kitchen ingredients, scraps of fabric, nature. We have always made collaborative pieces for fun, and I've even hired her to make elements for some of my sculptures and collages.

PB: Quite the sculptor in her own right. What's a material that delights you both?

CC: We're both sewing a lot these days. More like "sewn drawings" than functional things—I like how Geta Brătescu describes drawing with a sewn line. My daughter Tabitha bought herself a sewing machine last year. We both make it all up; we seem to have a similar tendency to start with a little bit of instruction or a kernel of technique and very quickly start to experiment and do things that are not correct but that excite us.

CityArts

AT LARGE

So Many Likes

by AMANDA MANITACH March 21, 2017

Nested squarely in the sprawl of South Lake Union's corporate glitter, one unassuming building is packed with a glut of excellent artwork. For Facebook's new Seattle office, the company commissioned a great deal of work as part of an extraordinarily innovative artist-in-residence program.

Launched at Facebook's San Francisco headquarters in 2012 by the program's founder and curator Drew Bennett, the company's AIR program aims to bridge Facebook culture (in this case with the emphasis on playfulness) and local art communities. The company's employees have enjoyed some serious doses of creative freedom for years. For example, they've been given free rein in the sprawling screen printing shop set up at HQ in 2010. Called the Analog Research Laboratory, employees are encouraged to mess around with printmaking as much as they like to keep their heads in the realm of the analog.

The first AIR program evolved from the energy of that laboratory-like space. Professional artists were commissioned to transform the offices, slathering the walls with vibrant designs and murals. It was such a success that the program has been integrated into Facebook's regional offices, including New York, Dublin and now Seattle. Unlike many companies that acquire artwork to flesh out a corporate collection, Facebook's AIR program doesn't mind if the art created on-site is temporary or plays with atypical materials. In fact, the curators prefer that artists do something outside of their comfort zone. Seattle's old guard rightfully harbors

misgivings about the Silicon Valley companies terraforming the city's neighborhoods, but this program should assuage some of their fears.

"Our roots are inviting artists and compensating them for their time, not for their objects," Bennett says. An artist himself, Bennett painted murals on Facebook's Palo Alto office walls back in 2007. He officially joined the company a few years later as art program manager to imagine a new kind of artist in residency program from scratch. "We want engagement," he says. "We want it to be very clear that the artist was here." The words *interconnectivity, utility, sharing, communication* pop up often in his speech.

"The language we use tends to mirror the language of our workplace," Bennett says, "Because whether or not artists are aware of it, a lot of the art-market infrastructure can be intimidating and there might not be a clear entry point for the uninitiated. For a lot of people, the idea of collecting art is something that only the affluent do—a precious, privileged practice that can seem off-putting. We're trying to strip all those trappings of the art market and get straight to the issues of creativity, innovation, inspiration. And we're interested in relationships with the artists. We're trying to socialize these different communities, and by doing so, build those communities."

During a recent tour of Facebook's Seattle office, *City Arts* was joined by Bennett, curator for Facebook's North American offices Dina Pugh and recent artists in residence Claire Cowie and Sasha Barr, who filled us in on their experience.

Artists working with the AIR program aren't given specific directives about themes or content. They also aren't given enough time to overthink things. Claire Cowie had only two weeks to prepare materials in her studio before gaining access to the freshly finished fourth floor of the Dexter Station office.

Once on-site, she collaged cut-out fragments of silkscreen prints directly to the wall. She also printed block prints onto unfinished wood panels. The resulting pastiche of imagery weaves like connective tissue, with small symbols and figures interlocked in silent conversation. Branches and root systems flow into bubble gum clouds, fantastical chimera and curlicue snakes. Tiny cats populate the landscape ("Because who doesn't love cat videos on the Internet?" Cowie says, laughing). As the project unfurled, Cowie found she was drawn to the challenge of embodying the idea of the tangent, of conversation threads and the edges and intersections of communication. She also ended up working beyond the initial space she was assigned: "They let me keep going around the corner, so I did!" Cowie spent 100 hours installing the piece, mostly at night while only a few employees were around.

Since launching the Facebook AIR program in Seattle, Bennett has partnered extensively with Urban Artworks, the prolific Seattle-based nonprofit that provides art opportunities for youth, pairing them with artists and businesses to create large-scale projects in their communities.

The work here is far from done. Currently, a number of blank walls are slated to be altered by more artists, including street artist No Touching Ground and further collaborations with Urban Artworks. In addition to the programming underway, the AIR program is expanding its global vision and will soon integrate lecture series, artist-led workshops and other chances for employees and artists to mingle. So far, it seems to be working. "The freedom they afforded—there was something incredible to it," Cowie says, when she and Barr sat down in one of a seemingly endless string of random, cozy glassed-in meeting rooms, surrounded by the buzz of the lunch hour. "No committee or approval meetings. And I was allowed to do whatever I wanted and was actually told explicitly that I didn't need to talk about Facebook or the web. That made me think about what I'm genuinely interested in, about the dynamics of a place like this. In doing that I was able to genuinely address issues about Facebook's community without it feeling forced. I did it in a way I wanted to."

Artists in the lab: Talk will highlight a creative partnership between art and science

washington.edu/news/2017/01/30/artists-in-the-lab-talk-will-highlight-a-creative-partnership-between-art-and-science

Arts and entertainment | Science | UW News blog

January 30, 2017

James Urton
UW News

Jennifer Nemhauser leads a research laboratory of scientists, all immersed in the complex world of plant hormones. But last year, the University of Washington professor of biology boosted her lab's roster with some unexpected talent.

Claire Cowie — an artist, UW alumna and lecturer — spent three months in 2016 as a part-time artist-in-residence in Nemhauser's lab. On Feb. 3, Cowie will deliver a talk to share her experiences and help spread the word about the benefits both she and Nemhauser see in their unusual partnership.

"This was such an insightful and creative experience," said Cowie, who earned a graduate degree in printmaking from UW and has taught at the university since 1999. "I hope that by sharing this story and describing the residency program, we can inspire other collaborations between scientists and artists."

By her own admission, Nemhauser wanted to host an artist in the lab "for years." She was motivated in part by a longstanding desire for new and creative ways to move science out of the lab and into the public sphere.

"I feel strongly that scientists, as public servants, must engage with the community in meaningful ways," said Nemhauser. "And many artists are already operating in the public sphere. Art and design have tremendous influence on how we communicate ideas."

Nemhauser also feels that scientists could benefit from the perspective that artists bring — especially in creative processes and abstract thought. She made her case to the National Science Foundation, which provided funds to host three artists in the lab over three years. Cowie worked with Nemhauser to sort out the details of the inaugural residency, and Nemhauser expects to use a similar format for the remaining two residencies, which will take place in 2017 and 2018 with different artists.

"We wanted to maximize Claire's time in the lab, giving her ample opportunities to observe and interact with us," said Nemhauser.

For 10 weeks, Cowie spent one day a week in the Nemhauser lab. She shadowed scientists as they performed experiments, talked with them about their research, learned some basic laboratory techniques and got to know every member of the group. She also attended the lab's weekly meetings, during which members discuss their experimental results and offer suggestions to one another.

These experiences gave Cowie perspective on the similarities and differences in how scientists and artists communicate.

"Terminology I," one of Cowie's works inspired by her 2016 residency in the Nemhauser labLeo Berk

"Science seems driven by a quest for specificity, for details, and I was immediately struck at how that specificity extends to communication — the words that scientists use," said Cowie. "Details are also important in artistic technique, but the ideas we communicate can be so much more open-ended."

Science's specificity is necessary to keep interpretation of experiments accurate and rigorous. But, said Nemhauser, it can also hamper scientists if they cannot think creatively or abstractly about their results, consider alternative explanations, and communicate their findings to peers and the general public.

Cowie and Nemhauser explored these concepts further through courses each was teaching during Cowie's residency. One day, they combined Cowie's screenprinting class with

Nemhauser's plant development course and had the biology and art students work together in small groups on simple printmaking projects.

"They loved it, and it was challenging and rewarding for both sets of students," said Nemhauser. "Each one had to articulate and share concepts with someone who wasn't from their field of study, their course, their 'bubble' — which really makes you step back and consider how you think, process ideas and communicate."

Back in the lab, Cowie's experiences in the Nemhauser lab launched her own printmaking, drawing and glass projects. She drew inspiration from everything from Petri dishes to plant anatomy. She has shared some works on Instagram, and others are on display in Hitchcock Hall ahead of Cowie's presentation.

"But these are just the beginning," said Cowie. "This will continue to fuel my projects for years to come."

Nemhauser said that the same is true for both her and her lab. She is preparing to host her second artist-in-residence later this year, and will incorporate Cowie's work into her Introductory Biology class this spring.

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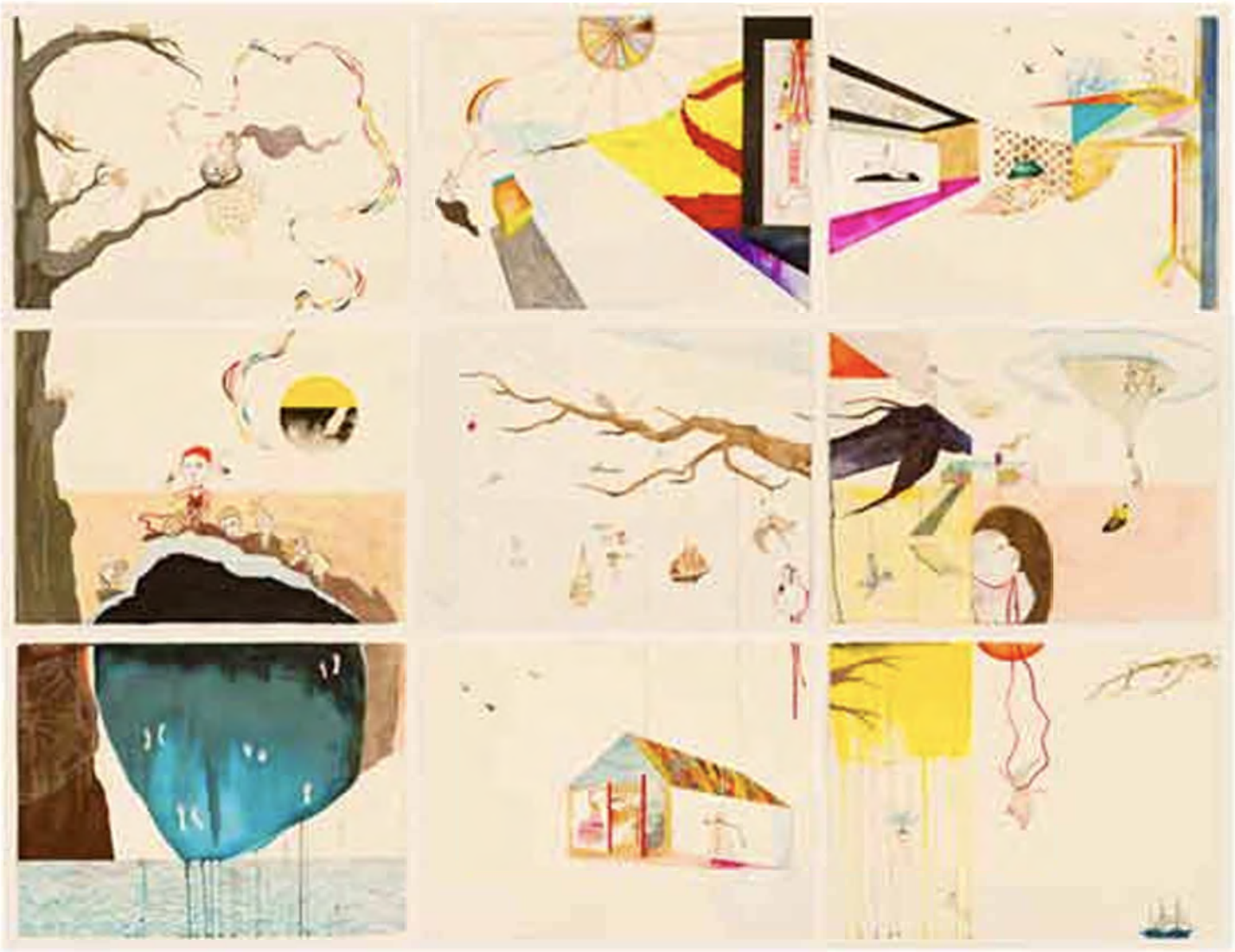
For more information, contact Nemhauser at jn7@uw.edu and Cowie at cmcowie@uw.edu.

Cowie's presentation is at noon on Friday, Feb. 3 in Hitchcock 132.

Grant number: IOS-1539834.

Tag(s): Claire Cowie • College of Arts & Sciences • Department of Biology • Jennifer Nemhauser • School of Art + Art History + Design

PREVIEW
THE GALLERY GUIDE



Claire Cowie, *No Escape* (2012), gouache, ink, watercolor, acrylic, graphite, collage, and thread on paper, suite of 9 [Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland OR, May 2-Jun 29]

Claire Cowie: Unreliable Source

Elizabeth Leach Gallery
Portland OR – May 2-Jun 29, 2013

In her new exhibition of works on paper, sculpture, installations and photographs, Claire Cowie addresses issues of family, community and culture through surreal and dreamlike imagery that is rooted in a personal mythology. The Seattle artist is asking larger questions about how to make meaning and understanding of the world around us. Over the years, Cowie has built up a visual vocabulary of exotic creatures, animals and humans inhabiting shifting and floating landscape-ish settings that point to the inner workings of the mind and the artist's current investigation of complex subjects such as trust, memory and navigating the waters of life.

Cowie's intriguing paintings use soft washes, whispery lines and collage elements on paper, creating an ethereal vision of the world. Although her paintings are delicately rendered, her subjects can be dark and often feel as if they are part of an inescapable dream.

Cowie's multi-faceted artistic approach relies on a loose narrative quality that functions somewhat like folklore. Many of the three-dimensional works are like characters or symbols from within her painted universe. Furry masks, colourful insects and disembodied fingers attached to the gallery walls bring elements from her airy paintings more concretely to life. Overall, there is a sense of mystery and wonder in Cowie's storytelling.

www.elizabethleach.com

Allyn Cantor

Claire Cowie, *Warrior* (2013), archival inkjet print on matte paper [Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland OR, May 2-Jun 29]

Claire Cowie, *Witch* (2013), ink and watercolor on paper [Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland OR, May 2-Jun 29]

art ltd.
May/June 2011

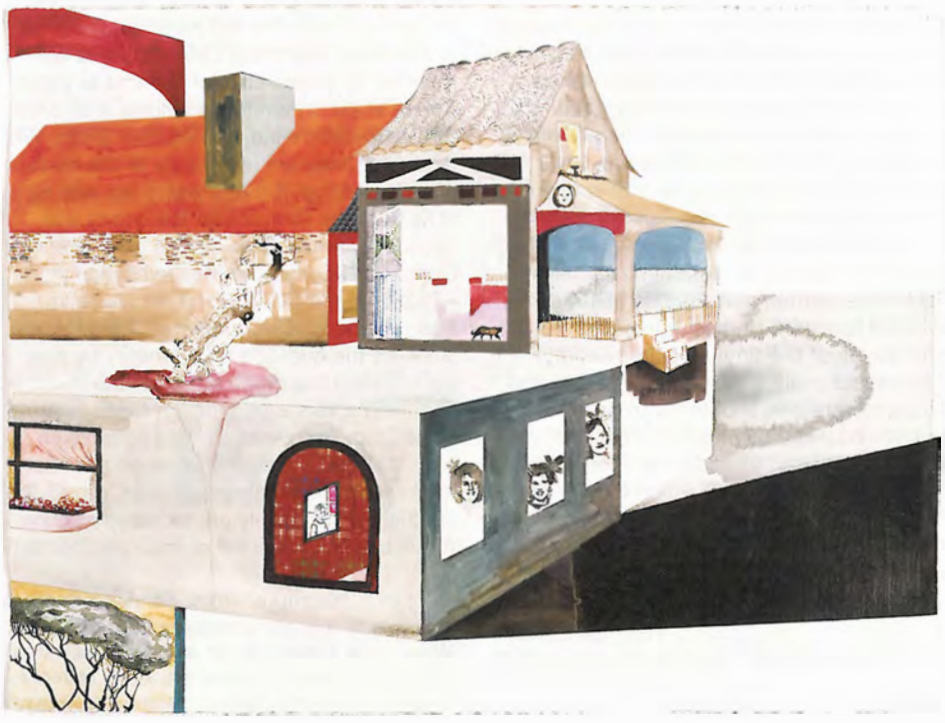
SEATTLE

Claire Cowie: "Works on Paper" at James Harris Gallery

Claire Cowie's past work often featured whimsical figures, and the landscapes on which they appeared, in mid-morph. Animals trod across landscapes, which might turn out to be the back of a rhinoceros; hills and dales an animal's humps. In the Seattle-based artist's current show, audiences are invited to venture into Cowie's shifting structure. But watch your step. Although presented as a deceptively simple-to-map twelve paper-panel grid, *Dead Reckoning* (100" x 90") employ shifts in scale, multiple perspectives and Cowie's signature paint drips to investigate physical and psychological navigational modes. Taking her cue from the title—a term signifying the employment of previously recorded courses to site the location of a vessel—Cowie suggests that travelers can only determine where they're going based on where they've been. In *Dead Reckoning* doors and windows allow the eye to access Suess-ian worlds consisting of igloos, falling cats, drifting boats and waiting maidens, executed in jewel-toned gouache, acrylic, watercolors and the occasional scrap of colorful fabric.

As if to offset this fantastical world of flatness, the exhibit includes two small-scale sculptures, both featuring boats. In *Landmark #2* (11" x 9" x 11") a lone figurehead is seen perched at a small craft's bow, while two small panels of watercolors double as sails and windows, into which the viewer can metaphorically escape if this forlorn vessel should be left high and dry. Indeed, perched upon a tall white base, Cowie's vessel is literally marooned. *Stranded Ship* (16" x 42" x 42") displayed on a low plinth, shows a larger sailing vessel stranded upon a bulbous rock of painted foam. The quilted "map" on which it sits hints at bodies of land and water—but then it's just a suggestion. Cowie's no backseat driver. She eschews concrete landmarks so that viewers can find their own way, offering a visual parallel to Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra's famous words from Don Quixote, "I know who I am and who I may be, if I choose." It may not be smooth sailing, but the course she suggests is well worth it.

—SUZANNE BEAL



"Dead Reckoning," 2010
Claire Cowie
Gouache, acrylic, watercolor, india ink and collage on 12 sheets of paper
22½" x 30" (Panel 6), Overall: 92½" x 93"
Photo: courtesy James Harris Gallery

The Stranger

March 8, 2011
Visual Art

Claire Cowie, *Dead Reckoning* (detail), 2010

Dislocated Screws
Claire Cowie at James Harris

by Jen Graves

Wed–Sat. Through April 2.

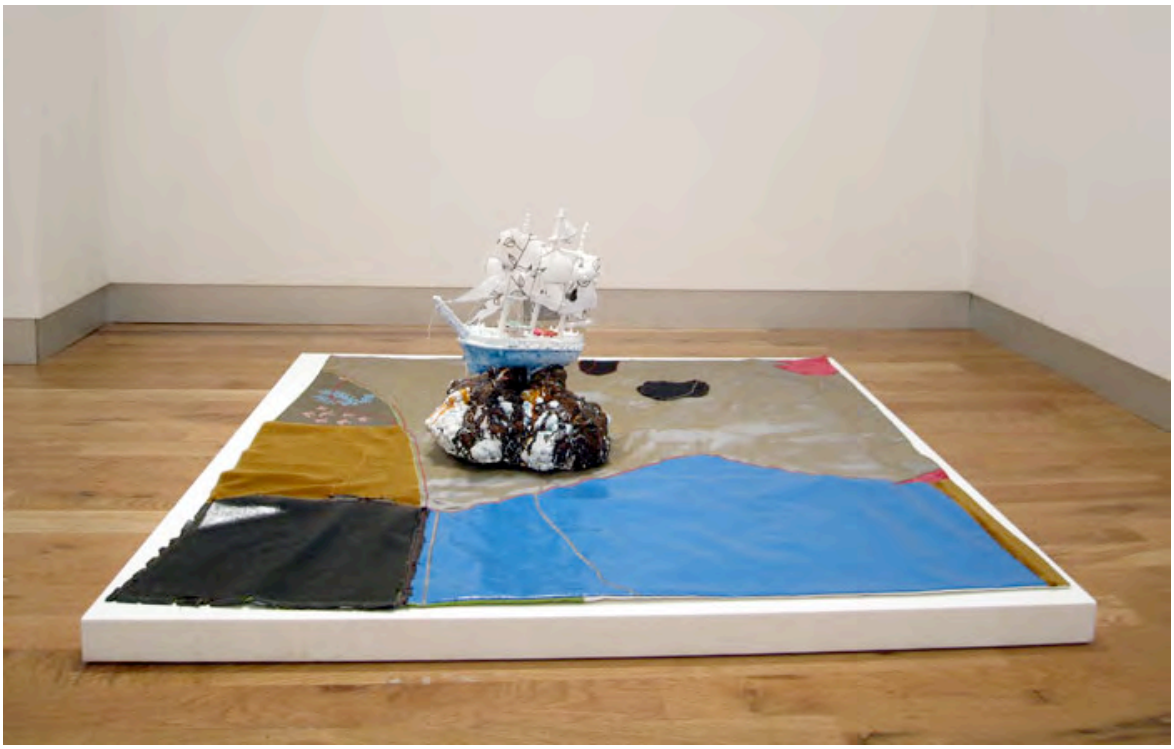
At James Harris Gallery, Seattle artist Claire Cowie has only a small interior room to herself, but her show, *Dead Reckoning*, is just plain major. The centerpiece is a grid of paintings on paper. According to the artist's explanation—*Dead Reckoning* refers to a navigation system by which movement is calculated based solely on previous positions, generating cumulative distortion—she began with the center panels and worked outward, returning to previous panels to rework. The effect is entropic, like the screw dislocation in the growth of crystals that late (*Spiral Jetty*) artist Robert Smithson found so enchanting.

This is Cowie's fifth show at the gallery in a decade. Her imagery is consistent—stark, drippy landscapes populated with trees, animals, and people (sometimes all three combined into hybrid creatures), presented as single views but incorporating shifting scales and perspectives.

In *Dead Reckoning*, her colors have grown more intense, her patterning more dense, and she's using collage. The result is exuberant, throbbing. The scenes are like elaborately staged Victorian dollhouses crossed with the busiest and brightest city market in the world, fully stocked.

Subjects sit looking out of windows embedded at an angle inside other windows, each frame the color of a ripe tropical fruit or the deep-hued cover of an antique book. In the center panel, numbered eight, a row house falling off the axis of the earth is bounded by two upright others, one made of brick and sporting proper family portraits on the top floor, the other just a dripping royal-blue silhouette where a home has been excised from the spot. Three shadowy men stand above the buildings in the corner of a frame that hangs in the sky like a giant window; a tree juts up behind them. These are nonspecific places, but they

do have systems, implied by flags that connote unknown citizenships, and designs that express a patchwork of unspecified heritages and histories.



Claire Cowie, 'Stranded Ship'

The subject matter isn't overly serious—stony-faced cats fly down from one window, turning over as they go—but the undertones of the events are somehow dark. And by not seeming to take herself too seriously, Cowie surprises you when you slowly realize what a master painter she is. She's accomplished in so many techniques: applying paint so it's solid and saturated, dripped, staining the paper, hatch-marking, shadowing. She forces your attention to toggle between the aftereffect of what's literally happened on the surface (a stain has been made, for instance) and the illusion of three-dimensional space—while also providing collaged elements with striking patterns the eye just wants to caress.

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Claire Cowie and Yunhee Min at James Harris Gallery

For a recent two-person show, the first and largest part of the James Harris Gallery was dedicated to Claire Cowie's series of paintings on paper, titled *12 Views* (all works 2008). Done in watercolor, sumi ink and pencil, they carry the delightful ungainliness that is Cowie's leitmotif—and what gives her work its power. This "anti-style" style bears some relation to work by artists as varied as Matthew Ritchie, Daniel Guzmán and Rita Ackerman in that forms are rendered distinctly and set up in a kind of counterpoint akin to the multiple sounds of jazz, or of Bach. It is a way of making one pay attention to several visual ideas or approaches at once and Cowie does it very well. In her paintings, these bits of disparate visual information are placed against large, childlike depictions of the landscape. Some order is imposed by the uniform scale of the paintings and by a horizon line of mountains, which is consistently about two-thirds up on the page. *Three Meerkats* depicts little animals on a bench, their fur rendered in deep, dark and scratchy lines against a soft expanse dotted with trees. In a number of other works, Cowie includes human heads sprouting from the earth, reminiscent of the last scene in the Buñuel film, *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) and just as ambiguous. The heads are composed of loose, light watercolor markings and, in one of these works, *Glacier*, become a cascade of faces—women, men, children—some smiling, some frowning and some looking perplexed.

Claire Cowie, *12 Views (Man on a Mule)*, 2008, watercolor, sumi color, pencil on paper, 22" x 30", at James Harris Gallery, Seattle.

Cowie's work connects the chimerical qualities of early Surrealism with an unsettling variety of painting styles. Tightly articulated animals exist in the same space with loosely painted heads and trees whose symmetry recalls the style of Mughal miniatures (especially *Pink Tree*, where a canopy transforms into a wildly beautiful ornament). Taken as a whole, these images confound linear narrative while at the same time seem to beg to be part of a story. For this exhibition, Cowie reinforced that tension further by slyly linking each work with the next. A hint of a basin in one painting becomes a full-blown valley in the next; the right edge of the last painting includes a branch that turns into a tree on the left side of the first work. One could argue that this wildly associative imagery is too private—a closed loop—and in many ways it is, but the overall effect has a broader function. Cowie's collection of characters and painting processes linger like random and fragmented late-night thoughts that one doesn't quite have the energy to resolve, but that somehow remain intact throughout the next day.

—Frances DeVuono

Claire Cowie: 12 Views and *Yunhee Min* closed in December at James Harris Gallery, Seattle.

Frances DeVuono is a contributing editor to *Artweek*.

Work by Claire Cowie
From her show "Homunculi" at the Elizabeth Leach Gallery

Northwest visions

By VICTORIA BLAKE
SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

Three of the 28 finalists for the Portland Art Museum's Contemporary Northwest Art Awards have shows up at Portland galleries: Claire Cowie at Elizabeth Leach; Jeffry Mitchell at Pulliam Deffenbaugh; and Fay Jones at Laura Russo. The shows present such varied subjects as randy sailors, happy elephants and howling wolves, and include everything from sculpture and light installations to watercolor and acrylic collage.

As different as their subjects and techniques are, the artists share some qualities. Each lives and works in Seattle; has won impressive awards and grants; and is fairly well collected by private and public institutions — Jones in particular, who is surely one of the Northwest's finest painters.

If the purpose of the museum's awards next year is to both define and represent the best of Northwest art, it is tempting to see the three shows as a sampling of the qualities curator Jennifer Gately likely identified as typical to the region: process-heavy, craft-inspired, with a tinge of folksy enthusiasm.

At just over 30, Cowie is the youngest of the three, and her work displays the crafty mix of low polish and high concept that many artists of recent years have embraced. The handmade abounds — there's plenty of dripped paint, textured surfaces and naïve forms — but with an air of playfulness and whimsy. The show, however, pairs that whimsy with a darker motif, like a pleasant dream gone bad. Titled "Homunculi," it riffs on the idea of the alchemist's homunculus, a 17th-century creation made out of clay, honey, blood and, in some cases, sperm.

Cowie's homunculi are hybrid creatures: a wolf covered with miniature horse heads; a tree of hands perched upon by sinister birds. The six foam-formed sculptures have been cast in resin, gooped with gesso and drizzled with watercolor. The effect is unsettling; the colors are either muddied or else hei-

Please turn to Page 42

Continued from Page 39

nously fluorescent, suggesting a nightmare. Which might not be out of the question. Situated in the gallery is a sculpture of a wolf howling in pain and an alien staring lovingly at its offspring. Like the other sculptures, these are intentionally messy, which neatly sums up Cowie's work: high concept, yes, but also chaotic and unformed.

Compared to Cowie, the calm exuberance of Mitchell's work arrives as a relief. Whereas Cowie courts chaos to the point of artlessness and harshness, Mitchell orders chaos, defining it with symmetry, repetition, and an extreme attention to detail.

Mitchell's exhibit shows the work of an accomplished artist utterly at play. His is a vision of an "Alice in Wonderland"-type dream in which elephants perform handstands and turtles greet viewers with friendly hellos. Known to value labor as its own artistic merit, Mitchell has usually included a few ceramic pieces in his shows that are simply functional objects: vases or shelves, for example. The Pulliam exhibit has several such pieces, including a hanging elephant lamp and a wood-framed mirror. But the most impressive works are closer to fine art, specifically the three large ball-point drawings that anchor the show.

To make the drawings, Mitchell turned his paper canvas around a center point, doodling outward, and magically unifying the designs into a cohesive whole. The ball-point lines wobble childishly, but they also remain remarkably controlled. The unification of the two qualities reveal a confident artist at his high-art, low-brow best — the conceptual antithesis to Cowie.

reviews

Works by Claire Cowie

Where: Elizabeth Leach Gallery, 417 N.W. Ninth Ave.

Closes: Sept. 29

Works by Jeffry Mitchell

Where: Pulliam Deffenbaugh Gallery, 929 N.W. Flanders St.

Closes: Sept. 29

Works by Fay Jones

Where: Laura Russo Gallery, 805 N.W. 21st Ave.

Closes: Sept. 29

Completing the trio of award finalists, Northwest grand dame Fay Jones shows a series of remarkable acrylic paintings. Her naïve aw-shucks drawing style borrows from a diverse list, the likes of Philip Guston, Henri Matisse and Joan Miro. With canvases stuffed full of narrative symbols — in one painting, a sailor presses his face against a woman's translucent skirt, itself superimposed by the figure of a pouting cat — the paintings suggest a world larger than the one presented within the frames.

Jones, the subject of a retrospective recently at the Hallie Ford Museum in Salem, has been exhibiting in the Northwest since the early 1970s. Forty years later the kinks of youthful experiment have been worked out. What the viewer sees now is the work of an artist who has earned control over both her subjects and her techniques.

That's a quality mastered to varying levels of success by Cowie and Mitchell, making the three CNAA finalists appearing this month an appropriately democratic, if not spectacular, sampling of the Northwest art scene.

Art in America
FEBRUARY 2007

Claire Cowie at James Harris

A printmaker turned sculptor who has garnered regional and national attention for her whimsical creatures, Claire Cowie often creates work that deals with transformation or with conceptual and physical boundaries. In an exhibition at the Henry Art Gallery in 2003, Cowie worked under the public eye producing watercolors and small-scale sculptures, often rendering a single subject in both mediums. She allowed drips off the paper's edge to mark the walls and floor, opening up her two-dimensional work to include the three-dimensional space of the room.

In "About Strange Lands," her third solo show at Harris, she applied gesso and watercolor to animals made of liquid resin over carved foam, and then used them as the foundation on which to build miniature landscapes, the bodies of her beasts merging with the topography to form a cohesive whole. The cascading drips seen at the Henry were absent from the watercolor paintings also included in the show but appeared prominently on the sculptures, where they flowed across the creatures' surfaces, reading simultaneously as rivers and bodily fluids.

Cowie was inspired by the true story of Clara, a rhinoceros exhibited to European crowds throughout the 1740s and '50s. But this thin slice of history merely served as a springboard for exploring her essential concerns, notably perceptual shifts between exterior and interior space and between wild and urban worlds.

In both of the sculptures displayed, Cowie eschewed realistic animal coats for plain white plaster. Animal markings in the natural world often function as camouflage; here the white suggested a merger with the gallery walls. In her smaller-than-life-size *Rhinoceroscape* (39 by 25 by 72 inches), a stolid rhino bears the weight of a tiny village. Small trees cast of solid urethane resin crown its back while flights of steps are inset into its two humps. In *Meerkatscape*, Cowie reverses scale. Her meerkat (a small member of the mongoose family that lives in burrows) was rendered much larger than life (87 by 25 by 34 inches), with sculpted fences and delicately painted-on brick walls encircling its torso and a dripping blue tree sprouting from the top of its head like a jaunty party hat. On the one hand, Cowie's miniaturized landscapes invite us to enter their fanciful world. On the other, she presents us with sizable creatures that have the potential to inflict harm. Even her meerkat (a normally docile animal) with its exaggerated scale seems frightening as it rears up on its hind feet.

The rest of the exhibition consisted of watercolors representing the natural world in an unnatural state: trees growing horizontally and turtles floating upside down or losing the homes off their backs.

In Seattle, several artists have recently investigated clashes between wildlife and urban life. Cowie removes sharp distinctions between the two realms by shrinking and expanding her subjects in unexpected ways, which results in a strange synthesis between man and beast, natural and man-made.

—*Suzanne Beal*

Claire Cowie: *Meerkatscape*, 2006, foam and mixed mediums, 87 by 25 by 34 inches; at James Harris.

Seattle, WA
(King Co.).
Seattle Weekly
(Cir. W. 110,000)

MAR 07 2007

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VISUAL ARTS REVIEW

This sea is sick: SuttonBeresCuller's brilliant *Ship*.

Disparate Beauties

Shooting out the foreground at the Northwest Biennial.

BY ADRIANA GRANT

THERE MAY NOT be much cohesion among the pieces selected for the Tacoma Art Museum's **8th Annual Northwest Biennial**, but there are a few standout works that make the exhibit worth a visit. The exhibition's introductory text, from curators Rock Hushka of TAM and David Kiehl of the Whitney, says the show's theme is "beauty," which is certainly broad enough, with works organized around the only slightly less inclusive categories of abstraction, landscape, humor, and figuration. But no matter. This show offers a chance to see some great individual pieces by some of Seattle's most interesting artists.

The most striking piece is *Ship in a Bottle* by SuttonBeresCuller. With the help of a crane, the trio placed a 26-foot 1956 Blanchard Senior Knockabout sailboat inside the museum's interior courtyard, set upon the stone surface of Richard Rhodes' ground-level sculpture, which slopes up toward the windows like the swell of waves. There's no literal bottle; it is represented by the reflective windows enclosing the courtyard, which contain and multiply the boat. *Ship* seems to be less about the landlocked vessel itself and more about its repeated images. Approaching this piece from just the right perspective, you'll be able to see the sailboat from every angle. With the sails luffing in the breeze, a blue sky makes the windows sparkle like water, and this charming little sloop, in its repeated reflections, indeed becomes a thing of beauty.

Once inside the museum's gallery space, a paper sculpture by Claire Cowie. Her compelling and playful work is often populated with landscapes and animals; here, her *Meerkatscape*, standing more than 6 feet tall, is an imposing animal that is itself populated with landscapes. The gesso-white meerkat wears a watercolor collection of houses like tattoos on its back, while a small development of homes have grown atop its paper feet. The overgrown meerkat (which in reality is a small African mammal related to the mongoose) wears a kindly expression, though the piece seems to comment on the out-of-scale human encroachment into animal territory. Perhaps this is an imagined hero, a giant meerkat ready to stomp houses.

Another work that explores landscape in an oblique way is the video series by Ellensburg artist (and member of the still-new Punch Gallery) Justin Colt Beckman. Beckman fills each video screen like a canvas, using a variety of materials, from snow to wood to beer cans to lime green paintball splatters. In *Degrees of Separation*, six monitors display six videos in which we see the screen being slowly filled (or emptied). At the end, each square is still with finger-marked snow or the wood slats of a newly constructed wall or a field of wildflowers exposed after rows of Busch beer cans have been shot out of view. Each high-speed video records the hard labor (and time) it takes to fill each visual field. You watch Beckman build a wall, hammering nail by nail, then propping the completed structure on its side to fill the screen. Another monitor depicts Beckman constructing a wall of snow, brick by white brick, until the he builds himself out of the picture and all you see of him are his gloved hands smoothing snow into place. Some videos move backward: Green paint splatters fly off the glass to reveal Beckman aiming the paint gun, masked, accompanied by his pooch. With all six videos going at once, backward and forward, it's not clear at first what's happening. You have to sit still for this work, you have to be patient to get where it's going. Beckman's videos are landscapes in motion. The setting seems to be the basis of the work, and what gets obscured.

Many of the strongest pieces seek to blur categories. *Almanac: Glacier Park*, by Marie Watt, is a sculpture of stacked blankets, some of them wool, some bronze, sitting atop red cedar. The cast linens are made important, solid, historical, reminding me of smallpox blankets or potlatch offerings. In a drawing by Keith Tilford, seeming scribbles come together to create a loose-lined crowd of faces: figuration, via a squiggly line drawing. Susan Dory's carefully rendered painting, *Chamber* (shown on our cover), depicts a pattern of colored ovals, evoking the way cells press against each other, creating order out of a loose mass. Anya Kivarkis' brooches—miniature chandeliers dipped in white auto paint or delicate silver fancies—seem to both be precious and mock their own preciousness.

Another sculpture that seems to explore its own seriousness is Claude Zervas' *Elba*. The cold cathode lamp sculpture exposes all its wires, which hang as a sort of curtain framing six small tubes of florescent lights, two parallel rows of three lights each. The label explains that this minimalist piece is a meditation on Napoleon's loss of power, named for his place of exile, and constructed with the architectural strictness employed at Les Invalides, his final resting place. This explanation may seem a bit overblown, yet this quiet sculpture with its grand story, three of its bulbs fading, is rather compelling.

It's not clear what these pieces, or for that matter, what most of the works on view here, have to say about the Northwest in general—perhaps all that holds this show together is the fact that the artists reside here, and the range of work is simply a testament to the diversity of art being made locally right now. With more than half of the 41 artists from Seattle, this biennial—chosen from artist submissions to a call for work, not an open selection by the curators—is simply not representative of the Northwest as a whole. That said, in the next Biennial, I would like to see more work by each artist—with the exhibit spreading into more than one gallery space at the museum, allowing the audience to engage in more of a dialogue with each artist.

agrant@seattleweekly.com SW

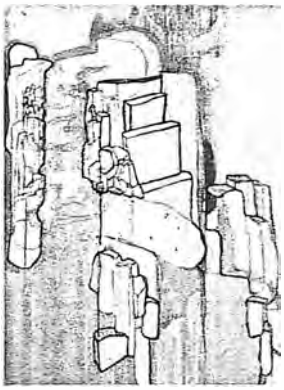
8TH ANNUAL NORTHWEST BIENNIAL Tacoma Art Museum, 1701 Pacific Ave., Tacoma, 253-272-4258, www.tacomaartmuseum.org. Ends May 6.

VISUAL ART

The day after Valentine's Day, a few discarded valentines had blown through the schoolyard by my house. I found them piled up against a chain-link fence like a tiny red and pink snowdrift. It made me think of the three shows up at Elizabeth Leach Gallery. Though each of the three Northwest artists--Claire Cowie, Amanda Wojick and Kristan Kennedy--use differing materials and styles, their work, for me at least, will be forever linked to decaying valentines.

The first things you notice in the space are Wojick's mixed-media sculptures. Band-Aids, linoleum chips and other materials cover Styrofoam structures, creating colorful landscapes that look a little like psychedelic birthday cakes plucked from someone's dream world. Wojick's works on paper combine drawing and the artist's apparent fascination with Band-Aids, resulting in a visual feast of common objects and doodle lines that somehow add up to unforgettable beauty.

A soft other-worldliness runs throughout the gallery. Claire Cowie's show, *Village*, uses watercolors and sculptures, to explore a land populated by tree boughs ripe with color, where clusters of cottages lay off in the distance and gnome-like creatures ride horses and wear pointy hats. Sparse and delicate--dainty even--there is a creepy element to Cowie's *Village* that may not be intentional, but I like it.



Three shows at Elizabeth Leach Gallery:
Amanda Wojick's *Cliffs and Waterfalls*, Claire Cowie's *Village*, Kristan Kennedy's *Valentine Field*; 417 NW 9th, through Feb. 26

The title of Kristan Kennedy's show, *Valentine Field*, is not a premonition of my schoolyard experience, but the name of a real football field that Kennedy found in a tiny town here in Oregon. The title alludes to memory and a sense of place, two themes that tether Kennedy's abstract mark-making to a sublime world of almost-perceptible landscapes. What were started as "drawings for drawings' sake" took on a hidden architecture, becoming imagined spaces with their own laws of gravity, space, and time. Many of the works defy a sense of scale, simultaneously suggesting the monumental terrain of another planet and a microscopic close-up of the neural pathways in your brain. RYAN DIRKS

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INTERNATIONAL

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SEATTLE

CLAIRE COWIE

JAMES HARRIS GALLERY

Though Claire Cowie trained as a printmaker, she's best known for the figurine-style sculptures she assembles out of doll parts and animal knickknacks and then casts in resin. As much homely mutant hybrid as sweet keepsake, the figures, which are painted in runny watercolors, often seem to be struggling against their support, be it a dainty cupcakelike base or a wide, clear blue platform. The instability of horizons and frames is Cowie's true subject and one within which her fine sense of sweet and cruel, and how they often resemble one another, is given full play.

For her second one-person outing at this gallery, Cowie returned to two-dimensional work, presenting a series of collages recycled from old prints and watercolors. Her subject is the area around her Seattle studio, a neighborhood dominated by scenes of industry—cement factories, commercial fishing boats, the cranes that lift containers off cargo ships—but also shared by a twenty-acre bird sanctuary. The strange tension between these different worlds is perfectly channeled into Cowie's clean and deceptively light constructions.

In her best works, factories and cranes appear to belch out whole landscapes of water and mountains and sky, suggesting a kind of wry romanticism in which industry might give birth to a landscape (although not the one you expect) instead of destroying it—a counterintuitive irony that sidesteps the usual polemic. Cowie's visual language is efficient and dreamy and spare, simplifying, say, factory stacks or a growth of reeds into boxy shapes and single gestures that do an enormous amount of labor. In *The Lone Boat*, 2004, a sweep of cut paper creates a shoreline against a white background, with boats created out of a few snipped-out brushstrokes bobbing in water you are left to imagine near houses that seem to rest on stilts. In another work, a pale, curving road cuts through a hillside made of a recycled patterned woodcut—the simplest of landscapes, created out of only a few lines, somehow both elegant and lonely. In its deliberate remove, her work recalls southern Sung-era paintings of the natural world; in the unexpected appearance of images within the source prints (chicken feet in a factory wall; a regal lady's head on the side of a crane), there's a kind of Monty Python–style pastiche that keeps the work from being too lyrical.

Occasionally these works do tilt too far toward the precious, as with *The Birds*, 2004, and *The Eagles*, 2004, both all-bird collages: You don't realize how neatly Cowie measures out nature and commerce, privileging neither, until the balance shifts. But for the most part this exhibition is full of interestingly equivocal relationships between landscape and material, as well as evidence of the artist trying to place herself in relationship to both. It's like trying to find solid footing in a fairy tale: Here there are many horizons, or variable horizons, or no horizons at all; here is a bit of weather that could also be a bird, a mountain's shoulder, or a road winding off into nothing.

—Emily Hall

Claire Cowie, *The House*, 2004, collage and woodcut on paper, 6½ x 5¾".

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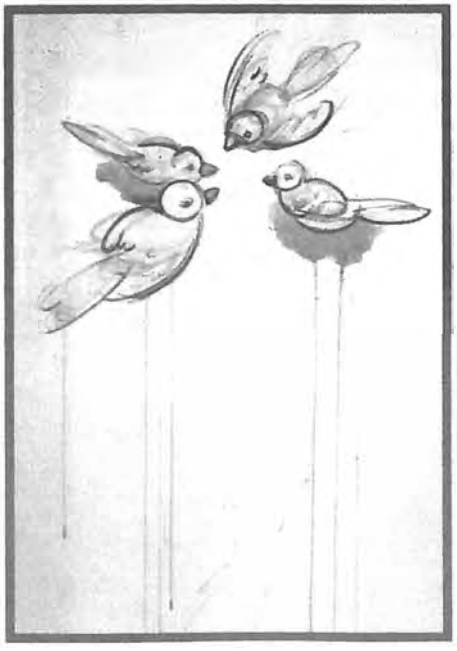
Washington

Claire Cowie at the Henry Art Gallery

There's a deceptive sticky-sweetness to Claire Cowie's sculptures, drawings and prints. Her animal, human and hybrid creatures conjure up the contents of Grandma's china cabinet or a discarded toy box mutated through memories of childhood imaginings. While the works flirt with a cloying nostalgia, they come to rest in a self-contained realm of curiously blithe melancholy.

Hunter (Snowglobe No. 9), from the 2000 series *Snowglobes*, introduces this muted, hermetic world. Under a delicate, upended sherry glass, a miniature man with an upraised arm stands atop what appears to be disproportionately large red and white bulbous mushroom caps. His cape and hat suggest the heroic woodsman from a romantic fairy tale. Frozen this way, he remains preserved like a precious souvenir from a nearly forgotten journey. Encapsulated and neutralized, this homemade miniature strikes a strong chord of pathos.

Resembling an overgrown dollhouse folded in upon itself, *Stage* exemplifies the quirky self-sufficiency of Cowie's art. I couldn't help feeling I was spying on this Lilliputian world going about its mysterious business. Rambling spaces of various dimensions house tiny figures enacting ambiguous dramas. For instance, at a ground floor corner several male figures, no more than an inch high, form a circle around three figures standing on a pillow-like island that rises from a blue paint wash suggesting water. Is this a baptismal sermon? In an upper story lofted room, figures hang upside down suspended from the ceiling by strings. Is this an acrobatic performance or a punishing ritual? The scenes divulge no specifics, but the compellingly odd circumstances lead the imagination to dream up explanatory or fantasy narratives to explain the happenings.



Claire Cowie, (above) detail of *Soldiers*, 2002, watercolor on paper, 66" x 51"; (below) *Four Birds*, 2003, watercolor on paper, 27" x 20-1/4", at the Henry Art Gallery, Seattle.

Stage served as a model for a series of photogravures. The soft focus and rich tones lent a film noir-ish air to the images. The scale shifts radically as well. What was an inch tall now has a weightier presence both in dimension and as sole protagonist within a focused frame. Cowie's project (technically not unlike those of photographers James Casebere or Thomas Demand and photogravure specialist Lothar Osterburg) finds currency in the translation from one medium to another and subsequently the transformation from kitschy object to provocatively malleable symbol.

Clearly a fruitful device for the artist, *Stage* also inspired watercolor drawings and other small sculptures. *Grouping* is an arrangement of mildly bizarre anti-Hummel plaster figurines, their chalky white surfaces spottily tinted with watercolor washes. Far from a china cabinet tableau, the figures sit awkwardly next to one another, only marginally engaged. The isolation each endures is set off by the weird amalgams Cowie has created—moose men, duck women and other human/animals. These outcast caricatures are both endearing and creepy as they induce a mild wonderment and gentle sadness.

Outsized drawings bring the miniature sculptures into cinematic scale. An economy of strokes expresses the essential forms; drips of excess wash mark the creative act and save the work from being merely illustration. Cowie movingly transforms her model/figurines by enhancing their poignancy: morphing appearances with distorted planes as in the misfit *Soldiers* or endowing a moody demeanor as in *The Hunter*.

During a concurrent residency Cowie created new work that reveals a playful lightheartedness. The sculpted hybrids are slightly larger and humorously absurd, sprouting several heads, tails and multiple human and animal attributes apiece. A fantastic watercolor, a giant group portrait of sorts, lines up all the sculptures frontally to meet us eye to eye. The new camaraderie among the figures, animated by the drippy, colorful washes, suggests they share a subversive joke, one they won't let us in on—well, not just yet anyway.

—Sara Krajewski

Flying Ladies of Leisure—Claire Cowie closed September 21 at the Henry Art Gallery, Seattle.

Sara Krajewski is a freelance writer based in Seattle.

Seattle Post-Intelligencer
Life and Arts
Tuesday, August 5, 2003
E1 - E6

Henry's fit to burst with its bounty of contemporary art

BY REGINA HACKETT
P-I art critic

What do Mr. Bubbles and upside-down trees have in common with pink men, big mouths and melting rabbits, distant birds, colossal teens and Babe Ruth in a chocolate crowd scene?

They're all members of the church of what's happening now, otherwise known as contemporary art at the University of Washington's Henry Art Gallery.

This unlikely cast of characters shares something besides visual savvy: All have been pushed aside by James Turrell, the man who gives dramatic character to colored space. His new (and permanent) sky temple in the Henry's courtyard, as well as his "Knowing Light" installations in the south galleries, have tended to cast everything else on view in shadow.

Two of the three non-Turrell exhibits don't deserve this fate: "Crosscurrents at the Century's End: Selections From the Neuberger Berman Art Collection," and "Claire Cowie: Flying Ladies of Leisure," both based in the north galleries.

If only they had those galleries to themselves. Instead, they're forced to share valuable real estate with an utter dud: "On Wanting To Grow Horns: The Little Theatre of

SEE HENRY, E6

Marilyn Minter's "Solo" is part of the "Crosscurrents at the Century's End" exhibit at the Henry Gallery.

HENRY: 'Crosscurrents' exhibit spills into hallways

FROM E1

Tom Knechtel," organized to tour by Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles.

With Knechtel's paintings in two major north galleries, "Crosscurrents at the Century's End" is more than a third smaller than it should be (check the catalog for this touring treasure and weep). Even in this reduced state, it's forced to spread out and spill into hallways, pooling in the open space below the stairs in the south galleries. To see everything that made the cut – single and multiple works from 40 artists around the world – you're going to have to hunt them down.

Paintings and manipulated or staged photographs dominate. Although sculpture is scant and video is nonexistent, what's really missing are clunkers in any medium. Everything here is materially smart and culturally incisive, and some of it is profound.

Rodney Graham has been taking portraits of trees since 1979. He turned his huge "Welsh Oaks (#6)" upside down not to become the Georg Baselitz of photography but to tip his hat to the medium's oldest form, camera obscura, invented or at least popularized by Leonardo da Vinci. Leonardo first described how to use lenses to capture an image, which in the process appears upside down.

Whatever Graham's reasoning, the results are radical metaphor for environmental arrogance, a shakedown of the natural world. Think of an Ansel Adams print getting the third degree. Graham has a similarly subtle yet rich tonal range, the exquisite detail and spacious calm.

Don't let Gregory Crewson organize your yard sale. His untitled color print is a backyard heap of everything you own with the neighbors pitching in over the fence, a staged shot of a neverland, suburban fantasy: ordinary people turning their backs on materialism.

Painter Marilyn Minter's updates the old Constructivist image of a woman using her mouth as megaphone. Here, it's a kid with braces. Her luscious lips are too ripe for the rest of her, the teeth with braces, setting up an implied conflict between stagy excess and vulnerable restraint.

The preteen in Rineke Dijkstra's photo is too big for her surroundings. The suggestion of a scale shift makes this sweet little thing look a little like Stalin posing for his official portrait. James Casebere constructs what he photographs. His "Tunnel With a Dark Hole" takes us inside a whale, edging toward the blow hole to look at the dark world outside. The immaculate purity of Oliver Boberg's "City Tunnel" gives this ordinary freeway underpass an unearthly appeal. If the scene appears to be too good for this world, it is. He constructed it by collage before photographing the results.

Vik Muniz painted Babe Ruth nearly lost amid his fans, the adulation on the edge of a danger that's muted by the medium. The paint is chocolate, caught by the camera before it leaked out of place.

Who remembers Lawrence Welk? Painter David Moreno for one. His comic-style no-maps-on-my-taps shoes are blowing bubbles in "Wonderful, Wonderful," a tribute to the bubble machine on the Welk show. Sculptor Don Brown's in the pink. That's him in candy-colored pink cast-polyester resin, trying to gain a little height and dignity from his pink polyester sculpture stand.

Don't miss the late Felix Gonzales-Torres' five small silver-gelatin prints hung high on the wall on the way to the restrooms. The artist photographed birds in flight, too far away to be more than smudges with wings. It's his version of Van Gogh's "Crows Over Wheatfield," the life of the world whirling away but still lovely in the dimming eyes of a dying man.

In an exhibit curated by the Henry's Robin Held, Seattle's Claire Cowie lights up two north galleries with her "Flying Ladies of Leisure" and their animal companions: melting bunnies, sad-sack cats and horses turned out to pasture. She has a fine, liquid line and a drained color sense that conveys a bleached kind of intensity.

What's wrong with Knechtel? He's an illustrator who's trying to fake his way into art by hyping up the content. Unlike Cowie, who makes empty space vibrate with the implications of her form, Knechtel's space is flaccid. He can't jump-start it by painting penises and fish heads, acrobats and circuses. Drawing is a skill, and he does it well. But as poet Charles Wright observed years ago, skill alone is like the "web without the spider. It can catch, but it cannot kill." ●

ART REVIEW

CROSSCURRENTS AT THE CENTURY'S END: Selections From the Neuberger Berman Collection

CLAIRE COWIE: Flying Ladies of Leisure

ON WANTING TO GROW HORNS: The Little Theatre of Tom Knechtel

WHERE: University of Washington's Henry Art Gallery, www.henryart.org

WHEN: Through Sept. 21. Hours: Tuesdays-Sundays, 11 a.m.-5 p.m., Thursdays till 8 p.m.

ADMISSION: $8 general, $6 seniors, free members and students

Seattle artist Claire Cowie's "Flying Ladies of Leisure" exhibit includes "Pig With Wings," a 2003 watercolor on paper.

P-I art critic Regina Hackett can be reached at 206-448-8332 or reginahackett@seattlepi.com.

Artist Claire Cowie in her Seattle studio.

Framed in Los Angeles

Seattle artist Claire Cowie opens her first out-of-town solo show. *Stranger* art critic EMILY HALL attends the opening and ponders the difference between the Seattle and L.A. art scenes.

I WAS DISORIENTED even before the airplane touched down in Los Angeles. Coming out of the thin clouds, I saw a dramatic curve of coast and beach, a few houses on sere roads snaking into the mountains, the occasional psychotic blue of a backyard pool. Then a quickening, more houses, a grid, a few grids, interlocking grids.

I thought I knew where I was. I saw Griffith Park, I saw the Hollywood Bowl, I saw... wait, no. We flew over six parks that looked like Griffith Park. The plane dipped and turned. Which way was the ocean? I gave up and wondered what I usually wonder when I fly into a mostly unfamiliar city, which is, how do you ever find anything?

As it turned out, a lot of Seattleites found their way to a small Los Angeles gallery called cherrydeloureyes to attend an opening for Claire Cowie, a Seattle artist in her first out-of-Seattle solo show. Cowie's Seattle dealer James Harris was there, as were collectors Ben and Aileen Krohn and Rebecca and Alexander Stewart (who all have Cowie's work in their collections) and artists Dan Webb and Leo Saul Berk (who is also Cowie's boyfriend). There were also a lot of former Seattle artists: Gary Smoot, Chris Grant (who is finishing the graduate program at UCLA and plans to stay in L.A.), Jeff DeGeller (who is at graduate school in Chicago, and couldn't stop saying, "I want to move here"), and Michael O'Malley (who used to teach at the UW and now teaches at Pomona). At the center of this web of connections was Cowie herself, hoarse but relaxed-looking in a puckered rust-colored blouse and red sandals, customarily modest and friendly and pleased.

I wasn't in L.A. only to support Cowie, although I'm a big fan of her work. I wanted to know how she would play in a town that doesn't know anything about SOIL, or *Multiplex*, or *LAVA*. I wanted to know how much cachet an artist from a city without an international reputation for contemporary art can bring. And if the cherrydeloureyes show does bring Cowie substantial success, there is a more pressing question: Why would it happen in Los Angeles and not here?

I first saw Claire Cowie's work at the Phinney Center Gallery three years ago. I can't remember what instinct took me there—something in the press release about lady aviators, which impressed me as an idea specific enough to be interesting. It was interesting, a theme examined through a series of prints and sculptures. But I was not prepared—there in the makeshift gallery carved out of a community center's hallway—for the high charm of Cowie's "snow globes": rubbery little animals in bright colors, set with silver snow in thrift-store stemware. They were friendly enough—cute and glittering—but there was something else to them, something harder to identify, something weirder, and dark.

This push and pull is at the heart of Cowie's art: the slightly loony and charming object shot through with darkness. In her first solo show in a commercial gallery, at the James Harris Gallery in Pioneer Square last year ["In and Out of Context," *The Stranger*, July 11, 2002], she created a set of sculptures assembled from bits and pieces of other things—dolls, china animals, gobs of plaster—into weird hybrid versions of your grandma's china-shelf figurines, which she then painted in watercolors, in wispy contrast to the drippy solidity of the plaster, making you more aware of both. Already there was a sophisticated advance from her first show, an interaction between viewer and installation that created shifts in perspective and frame. The effect was giddying—clever and vertiginous and a little menacing. One of the unexpected effects of the James Harris show was how much I wanted those figurines—how much she had created a desirable little thing, no matter how quietly creepy. She had tapped into a vein of longing for objects, the pull of the collectible, so much so that her work sold quite well. (The ability to instill a desire for objects is, not incidentally, an excellent quality in an artist.)

In early April, I went down to Cowie's South Seattle studio to see what she was making for her Los Angeles show. She shares studio space with six other artists in a Duwamish-side warehouse that is partially occupied by the FBI. The approach to the studios is rather theatrically grand: past a guard, down a long, quiet, deserted alley between warehouses, past a tangle of discarded nets, floats, and giant cable spools. Inside, Cowie and the other artists have carved out a space—have literally put up their own walls—that they call Most Wanted Studios, in reference to their neighbor, but which might as well refer to their status; they are among the most established young artists in Seattle, represented by the top three dealers: James Harris and Greg Kucera at their galleries, and Billy Howard at Howard House. One cluster of artists, right inside the door, is made up of Dan Webb, Mark Takamichi Miller, Jeffrey Simmons, and Leo Saul Berk; at the far end of the warehouse ("down the block," Cowie jokes) is Claude Zervas and Sami Ben Larbi, this last being the only (so far) unrepresented artist in the group. The center space of the warehouse is taken up by what I understand are cars confiscated by the FBI, and at least one pleasure boat.

In her studio, Cowie sat at a large table surrounded by paintbrushes stuck in paper cups of dirty water, and sculpture in various stages of finish. Part of the table had been painted a medium sky blue, and was crowded with figurines, most of them appearing to be sinking into the blue, or else struggling out of it. They were, variously, unformed and superformed—melting, mixed, this grafted onto that. There were lady heads attached to duck bodies. There were three submerged squirrels cavorting around half a dinosaur; a couple of tiny bunnies, paws clasped in ingenuous innocence, paying a kind of demented homage to an upright horse (with prominent painted teeth) that sprang from the surface like an ancient column. There was a large melting rabbit, with a pointed,

rather hostile glare, painted in blue-black patches that ran down his sides, so he appeared to be wallowing in something particularly nasty.

These pieces are no longer assembled and then covered in plaster, but cast in resin, which, besides being more reliably archival, is a conceptual departure. It allows Cowie to make multiples of her work, to paint several of them, and then to edit the army of figurines down to the best ones, shifting, in fact, the process from intuitive assemblage to sculpture in a more traditional sense: The pieces are no longer *like* figurines—they *are* figurines.

At the time of my visit, she was still trying to decide how to arrange them, how to create the relationships between surface and object—what, in fact, the surface *meant*, whether it represented a liquid or solid. Mary Leigh Cherry and Tony de los Reyes (the owners of cherrydelosreyes) had asked for a show of only sculpture, with the focus on the enormous blue platform—so that all those relationships, those bouncing glances, those shifting frames, take place within the platform. Cowie had nine months to conceive and execute this show, longer than for any other exhibition of her work, and with this time began to think more professionally—with the decision to make less vulnerable work, with the editing process that allowed her to make 200 pieces of which she eventually showed 40. When the Los Angeles show, called *Still Life on Blue*, is finally assembled, the figures will find themselves in new arrangements. In my favorite, a huge yellow sheep rises from the blue surface like an island in the South Pacific, with a handful of the tiny bunnies scattered around it like shoals.

Cherrydelosreyes is a Venice storefront, a couple of miles from the beach on a main drag populated with liquor stores and auto parts yards. There's a lone coffee shop where I stopped to pull myself together after my disorienting flight; it slowly dawned on me that it was run by born-again Christians. This is not a gallery district—definitely not Pioneer Square.

The first people I saw at the gallery when I arrived were Cowie and Berk, who had already set up the platform, a more substantial version of the table in Cowie's studio, built by Berk and de los Reyes. It takes up most of the room at four feet by twelve feet, and is painted a blue a few shades darker than the one I saw in Seattle.

Cherry took me out back, where we sat in the sun and talked next to the giant sheep, drying after a new coat of paint. She told me about the gallery's history, how she used to have a gallery in her garage (she guessed that from 100 to 300 people would show up for openings), and de los Reyes used the Venice storefront as a studio. They met in 1999 through mutual artist friends, and when he began to put up exhibitions, they would run a shuttle bus on opening night between her garage and the gallery. In fact, Cherry told me, people were sometimes more enthusiastic about the shuttle than the art. People in Los Angeles get *very* excited about transportation.

> The scene in L.A. is not one of artists competing for the same crumbs, but artists creating opportunities for themselves, and for other artists.

Cherry and de los Reyes eventually fell in love, combined galleries, and when that worked out very well, got married. The gallery is open only on weekends—Cherry works two other jobs, and de los Reyes is also an artist, who shows in Seattle at Howard House—but it is a thoroughly professional operation, with serious attention paid to their artists; Cowie's is their first non-L.A. show. Already they have an international clientele and a good reputation—somewhere between fly-by-night alternative space and established commercial gallery, and they've accomplished this in what seems to be opposition to the conventional wisdom of gallery practices.

Cherry's comment about the popularity of the shuttle stayed with me, as did something she said about collectors, about the established culture of collectors who throw big parties to show off their new acquisitions, putting those artists' work in front of so many more eyes. Gallery owners know who those collectors are, and court them. It occurred to me that art is an intrinsically social scene in Los Angeles, and that attaching art to social life is a kind of dissemination that isn't often practiced in Seattle, First Thursday notwithstanding. Yet art-as-social-scene has worked spectacularly well in a few local cases, such as Greg Lundgren's Vital 5 Productions, such as Fuzzy Engine, such as the brief *LAVA* invitational—but only after the venue, or the artists, have already proved popular. In Los Angeles, novelty is a virtue in itself.

What fuels, in part, the appetite for newness, is that there are so many art schools in Los Angeles (UCLA, Art Center, Otis, CalArts), and the jump from art school to gallery is a more natural one. Galleries, curators, and collectors troll student shows and studios for new work. (An April 24 *New York Times* article about established L.A. museums showing the work of emerging artists notes that these museums keep "close tabs on the Los Angeles art community," because they "can no longer ignore work produced in their own backyard.") And students, with their endlessly optimistic energy, tend to open alternative spaces; when they close, others take their place. Having people accustomed to seeking out novelty, Cherry theorized, works both in art's favor and against it. On the one hand, there is a more adventurous spirit; on the other, you might be quickly forgotten.

You could take a cynical road, and observe that art, like most things in Los Angeles, has become entertainment, that it has sacrificed its high philosophy for visibility. But I would argue that this is not a bad thing. I would argue that art elevates the social encounter, rather than being diminished by it.

JOHN E. HOLLINGSWORTH

On one of my afternoons in L.A., I took a walk with Gary Smoot, a Seattle artist and set designer who moved to Los Angeles about a year ago, after years of dual residency. We were in Venice, walking along a stretch of beach known for its freakishness, and I wondered why everyone is so interesting here, so, in the condescending parlance of our time, colorful. And then I looked more carefully at the crowd and realized that they're not that much more interesting than the wildlife on Pike/Pine on any given day, but here everything is amped, as if in glaring Technicolor. The frame—as in one of Cowie's own shifty installations—makes it more interesting, the crazy Los Angeles frame, a frame, moreover, that everyone is aware of. Inside of this frame I feel more colorful, more necessary.

And the frame makes art itself seem more important than it does in Seattle. The theory that has been passed around—and not entirely as a joke—among art people in Seattle is that the likely new collectors, those who made money in the software boom, are not particularly social. This theory depends too hard on the image of the artisocial computer nerd, certainly not always true, but feels somehow truer when faced with the super-outgoing film industry. And film has a glancing relationship with art; in fact, CalArts, now a respected art school, was started by Disney in order to train animators. So art is

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PHOTO COURTESY SARAH HOLLIS GALLERY

Part of the installation at cherrydelosreyes gallery in L.A.

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part of the daily conversation in L.A., even among people who are not, strictly speaking, art people. The scene in L.A., consequently, is not one of artists competing for the same crumbs, the same bits of attention, but artists creating opportunities for themselves, and for other artists. This, according to some of the artists (but certainly not all) who have moved to Los Angeles from Seattle, makes it friendlier, more generous.

I've seen how this works. When I visited a few years ago, I attended the closing party for an excellent space called George's Gallery, and instead of the kind

PHOTO COURTESY JAMES HARRIS GALLERY

of funereal handwringing that would have prevailed in Seattle when a good space closed, the mood was buoyant. The owner of the gallery was relieved that she'd have more time to make her own art. There was talk of someone opening a gallery in a garage, which turned out—in the way that small connections grow large in Los Angeles—to be Cherry's.

By most measures, Cowie has succeeded as a Seattle artist—she's certainly come a long way from the Phinney Center Gallery, and done very well even for someone with an MFA (hers is from the University of Washington). She's busy planning two upcoming exhibitions, the first at the Henry this July: a series of photogravures from last year, shown with selected works from the last five years and an open studio in which the artist at work becomes part of the installation for a few weeks—by all accounts, a major museum show for an emerging artist. Then, next January, she'll install the last in a series that the Bellevue Art Museum is calling *Nest*, in which local artists transform the museum's library into a living space. She's also talking to Harris about another gallery show later in 2004.

So getting her work in front of people in another big city, in a more important art city, seems like a natural step for Cowie, although what feels natural in Los Angeles is more difficult here, largely because most commercial Seattle galleries don't regularly show young emerging artists (Howard and Harris are very much the exceptions)—there simply aren't as many options. (I've heard people grumble that Seattle artists are too diffident about success, and don't chase opportunities as fiercely as artists in other cities; of course, this listlessness could be due to the lack of opportunities... and the snake eats its own tail.)

Cowie has not been diffident, but of course investment hardly guarantees success. And was her show a success? Everyone seemed to think her Los Angeles debut went very well—me included. Since the show's opening, eight pieces have sold

(including the melting rabbit I adored—one of the most expensive pieces). A gallery owner's work, of course, continues long, long after the opening. Cherry has brought a few critics to the show, and on May 2, Leah Ollman wrote a short review in the *L.A. Times* about Cowie's "discomfiting comfort objects," comparing the thematic vein of her work to Mike Kelley and Ugo Rondinone: "Cowie's 'still life'... is both endearing and creepy, and certainly intriguing... [she] plays off the rich nostalgic archive of childhood to offer up work that's vaguely troubling. Her menagerie elicits pathos most of all, for those characters and kids alike whom fate has exiled from the dominion of the cute and cuddly."

But success, even in Los Angeles, is measured over time, so all we are left with are our impressions. A few days after we returned, I met Cowie at a tiny Capitol Hill coffee shop to see what she thought, and when I looked at her it was as if we had traveled a great distance together and then returned.

"I was surprised by the attention and respect I got," she said. "I expected a higher level of competition, maybe a reluctance to be nice, but it wasn't like that at all." When she talked about the differences between showing in Seattle and showing in Los Angeles, she sounded more like an artist who has matured than an artist who has been plucked out of obscurity. "For Jim [Harris]'s show, I was less sure of the work, but more sure of the reception," she said. "In L.A., it was the opposite. My show at Jim's *felt* like a first show." Which is to say, when she showed in L.A., she was ready to show in L.A. Not earth-shattering; perhaps the truer for it.

What was unexpected for me was how the cherrydelsreyes opening made me feel about Seattle, how it stirred my jaded heart. Seeing so many Seattleites in a Los Angeles gallery on the occasion of a Seattle artist's show started to undo much of my Seattle-versus-Los Angeles theory, to undo my view of our art scene as tight, competitive, and grim. But throughout the evening of the opening—at the gallery, at a party afterward at a sumptuous canal-side house—I continued to ask the same question of anyone who would talk to me: What's the difference between Seattle and Los Angeles? The answers tended to grope toward abstraction: "The Seattle art scene needs some grease thrown on the fire," Chris Grant told me; "Los Angeles is more evasive than Seattle," Gary Smoot said, and then trailed off.

And then, at some point during the party, I wondered, is this a question that should be answered? Perhaps not. So I let someone make me a drink and watched the lights of Venice playing over houses reflected in the canal. ■

AROUND THE GALLERIES

Recasting objects of childhood

Discomfiting comfort objects. That's what **Claire Cowie** has arrayed atop an expansive platform dominating the front gallery at Cherry de los Reyes Gallery. Cowie, a Seattle painter and sculptor making her L.A. debut here, appears to have convened a meeting of mutant stuffed animals and once-benign decorative objects.

They gather on the blue tabletop in small clusters, often with one larger character holding court among several smaller ones. Cowie's "still life," as she calls it, is both endearing and creepy, and certainly intriguing.

Cowie's works derive from figurines and toys — porcelain songbirds, stuffed bunnies — that have charm, sometimes in saccharine excess. Cowie recasts them, literally, in resin, then dips them in white latex, rendering their forms generalized and misshapen. A rabbit's tufted fur looks sodden with glue. A lamb's coat appears curdled, lumpen. A giraffe's sleek legs are instead thick and clumsy.

Courtesy of cherrydelosreyes

BUNNY: *Claire Cowie recasts toys and figurines in resin, then dips them in white latex.*

Some animals have human faces, some have horns, some look mired in puddles, some are missing limbs. Cowie gives the figures simplified features in watercolor, and drippy washes of pale color-outtake colors of brick, acid yellow and watery olive to match their outcast personalities.

Like Mike Kelley, Ugo Rondinone and more than a handful of other artists, Cowie plays off the rich nostalgic archive of childhood to offer up work that's vaguely troubling. Her menagerie elicits pathos most of all, for those characters and kids alike whom fate has exiled from the dominion of the cute and cuddly.

Cherry de los Reyes Gallery, 12611 Venice Blvd., L.A., (310) 398-7404, through May 25. Open Saturday, Sunday and by appointment.

The Stranger, Vol. 11, No. 43, July 11 – July 17, 2002, p. 34

The Secret Life of Tschotkes by Emily Hall

FOR A LOT OF PEOPLE, the idea of "whimsy" (one of my least favorite words) is confined to a shelf of knickknacks; maybe your grandma had them (mine certainly did): kittens, teacups, Fragonard-style ladies curtsying to gentlemen in pantaloons. It's hard to know what's invested in these objects that serve so little purpose—whether their presence indicates something personal or sentimental, or perhaps a taste for clutter, or whether the owner has simply ceased to see them. I find them strange because they're figures taken out of context, with no narrative or formal structure to guide them, wholly complete unto themselves, at the same time mysterious and remote.

Claire Cowie
James Harris Gallery, 309A Third Ave S, 903-6220. Through Aug 3.

Claire Cowie has taken these figures and exploded them. Not literally; rather, she's used them to engage with ideas of place and purpose. It's a rare art show that can draw on some pretty strict and theoretical questions about formal qualities, narrative, and scale, but can also be sweet, funny, and twisted, and Cowie has managed it quite beautifully. The work for *Stagings*, her first solo show, began with a kind of dollhouse that she built and populated with homemade figurines—strangely hybrid animals and people making vague, uninterpretable gestures—and then photographed. Some of these images were turned into photogravure images, and some of the figures have been painted into large-scale watercolor landscapes; the prints and the paintings plus the figures form the content of the show. The house itself isn't included, and that's a deliberate choice: to remove the figures from the context that gives them meaning and create a tangle of echoes (of gesture, of color) within the larger space of the gallery.

There are the figurines themselves, not your grandma's tschotkes: plaster sculptures covered in white latex paint, touched with odd bits of color. Some of them have impeccably smooth surfaces, like fondant icing on a cake, and most are set into deep, disc-shaped bases. "Set into" isn't quite right: they drown in it, wade through it, rise out of it. Most of them are animals, and they're pretty damn cute, which is and is not the point—you project onto them those squishy emotions reserved for pets, but the hard surfaces resist your love as well as your interpretation. Some of them are creatures that could have come straight out of Greek mythology—strange animal-human combinations, cloven-hooved women, a man with a moose head growing out of his huge noggin.

Alone, these figures would be interesting enough, but seeing them painted into big, deft watercolors creates a serious shift in framing, a whole new world. Even when the painting bears no distinct horizon, they become faint figures in a Japanese scroll, the inhabitants of a dollhouse seen from an omniscient and privileged viewpoint. The walls of the gallery become the walls of a house, and suddenly you notice how glances between the creatures and the paintings are zipping around you. Next to one of the paintings is a gorgeous, drippy sculpture of a kangaroo; he seems to look at the painting, at the other figures, and then back at you. There you are, an inhabitant of the very house you're observing.

Or perhaps just a guest. Cowie's photogravures expand and project her world into a series of cinematic gestures, shady and grainy depictions of scenes that are obliquely emotional; in one, Mr. Moose Noggin confronts a curl of thorny branch in a tight space, and suddenly his indistinct expression becomes one of frank anguish and boiling fear. These prints give the figurines an added layer of history and dignity, and of remove, confirming what many of us have always suspected about the secret life of objects—namely, that they have one, and it has nothing to do with our bullying human machinations.

The installation of Cowie's work is deceptively loose, with platforms of different heights throughout the gallery, the paintings cheerfully and brightly lit. But the more time you spend in it (and you should aim to be alone there for at least a little while), the more it adds up, knitting its elements together. It's hard to tear yourself away, hard to shake the feeling that something's going to happen when you're not there. ■

PHOTO BY: C. TAYLOR

CLAIRE COWIE *Sweet, funny, twisted*