

Elizabeth Bryant at SolwayJones

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In Elizabeth Bryant's recent photographic work at SolwayJones elements of artful deception and technical purism meet at some uneasily defined juncture. On initial observation, her dense compositions—full of flower excess, bizarre stagings and objects lost and found—suggest the digital thumbprints and mouse-happy glibness of Photoshop manipulation. But no: For Bryant, heeding the venerable ideal of photography without trickery is paramount. What she shoots is what we see, and aspects of manipulation occur mainly in the preparatory and perceptual stages of the art, the before and after factor of the art itself.

As much as Bryant's playful and mildly anarchic image play triggers a sense of post-postmodern thinking, the artist is also tapping into the traditional Japanese floral art tradition of *ikebana* in her canny arrangements of kitschy ceramic objects, faux natural wallpaper backdrops and actual plant life. Wobbly yet without faltering, she walks the line between natural truths and shameless artifice by setting up lovely but plainly phony tableaux in which nature references are at once central and surreal.

A peripheral project connected to the exhibition is the small, spare book, *Today's Forecast*, in which Bryant's images are adorned with poetic texts by Eve Luckring, better known as a video artist and demonstrating her apparent visual-conceptual acuity here. Working both in *haiku* and the more esoteric and ancient Japanese form of *tanka*, Luckring fittingly abets Bryant's imagery with texts that hum quietly with wit and inside-out equations of meaning.

Samplings of Luckring's poetry wafts into the gallery space, as well, as with these words gracing the wall next to the piece called *Spotted Dinosaur*: "this small world/out plane rises up/into March winds/over the Pacific/elephant seals roar." In Bryant's image, a scrappy-looking ceramic dinosaur is adorned with a pomegranate and bird-of-paradise blossom, their wing-like form echoed in the languid seabirds on a piece of seaside-themed wallpaper, and all of the materials set into an actual garden. More to the point, our sense of the actual versus the illusory is taken for a joyride.

Another elliptical Luckring poem is placed subtly on the gallery's front window, half legible inside and half outside the space. Similar dualities and rewired perceptions also matriculate throughout Bryant's art, never as straightforward or logical as it may initially appear. Raggedy delineations of her materials and the blending of decorative backgrounds and protagonist "figures" give her scenes an elusive connection to conventional scene-setting values—whether in a fine art, floral, or theatrical context.

An implication of shrine-like ritualism in this work comes especially to the fore in the piece called *9/11 Onion*, the very title of which pricks up our socio-historical sensors. Set against sloppily torn white paper and a blood red floral wallpaper background, a crude crucible-like ceramic vessel contains a candle-like onion and a tangle of a branch like a crown-of-thorns. *Medusa's Head* is more mythic in nature, its ceramic mask with wild flowery branches for hair serving as a culture-crossing emblem of Asian and western aesthetics.

In Bryant's works, part of the odd appeal has to do with a tension of spatial considerations, from the disorienting depth characteristics and the compression of flatness of the component parts involved. Trompe l'oeil also comes into play, although she remains adamant about keeping the photo process real. Somewhere between her loose, free-spirited reference gathering stage and the pristine end product lay the inscrutable but alluring essence of her art.

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