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COLUMN

Pleasingly blurring the line between fine art, craft

DANIEL KANY / ART REVIEW

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Work by furniture maker Matt Hutton.

The Institute of Contemporary Art's "Archaeology Above Ground" is a juried exhibition that features four current MECA faculty members: Matt Hutton, Meg Brown Payson, Tina Rath and Peter Gruner Shellenberger. The show is extremely handsome and interesting.

Most notable is the role of fine craft as contemporary art. How casually and easily this show melds what are generally considered fine art and fine craft media should not be overlooked or ignored.

Just trying to categorize Rath's installation is an interesting lesson in mode and medium. The installation starts with rectangular maple boxes mounted directly on the wall in groups composed with a Modernist sensibility.



Images courtesy of Institute of Contemporary Art
Work by painter Meg Brown Payson.

The boxes play a role similar to trees in the woods: They are the basis for the organization as well as a sort of scaffolding for the rest of the forest life. From the maple boxes spring blackwood and felted fungus forms as well as hosts of precious flora made of silver, quartz, mink and enamel.

The effect is one of healthy, organic growth that feels like a genuine ecosystem: composed and balanced from afar and exquisite up close.

Is Rath's work furniture? Sculpture? Jewelry? Her chops reveal she is a jeweler of considerable talent, and some of the elements are in fact brooches. The work is metaphorically rich and clearly legible as contemporary art, so does it even matter if the specific genre is obvious?

Shellenberger's radiographic photographs were made by setting Fiesta ware bowls of the '30s and '40s with uranium in the glaze on sheets of film for 45 days – with Cracker Jack prizes between them. They are beautiful – deliciously grainy purple and blue circles with a pink cast.

The dated images help reveal their process story as well as the echoed metaphors of history and memory. The radioactivity and World War II-era imagery add a dark energy that shades any sense of nostalgia. For all their concept, metaphor and process, Shellenberger's works hold up as art objects -- his pair of 7-foot-tall prints deserve specific praise.



Installation by Tina Rath.

Hutton's bed boards need to be seen. They hold up gorgeously whether you consider them in furniture, sculptural or architectural terms. They are creative, innovative, witty and very handsome. Six of them hold the ICA's interior Lunder Gallery like nothing else I have seen there.

Hutton's work somehow transcends the art-versus-craft issue by pressing a furniture-versus-architecture dialectic. His shift between modes, however, is pleasurable. It's clear the work can swing either way depending on the context. It's that simple. And yes, it's that good.

Payson's painting installation doesn't borrow its gallery space – it owns the space. It is a rectangular room with a broad entrance in the middle of a wall. The 2-foot-high panels run as a single band around the entire room. They are green with simmering layers of transparent (and well-handled) acrylic paint issuing forms that flow between bubbles in water to microscopic life.



The biological richness of Payson's work is well-matched by its effect as an installation that seems to take several lessons from Frank Lloyd



"Nuclear" print by Peter Gruner
Shellenberger.

Wright, including running an element around an entire rectangular room; thinking about the piece in terms of the total space (no matter how spare); and using corners as key points.

Payson's work unapologetically uses the metaphorical assumptions of modernist painting, especially its acknowledgement of the human body. The work might be largely abstract and void of solid forms, but it holds your body in place. Visually at least, you swim in that space.

Until somewhat recently, I had not seen many shows at the ICA that I thought were particularly strong. The past few, however, have been spare and thoughtful. "Archaeology Above Ground" is more proof the ICA seems to be onto something.

Freelance writer Daniel Kany is an art historian who lives in Cumberland. He can be contacted at: dankany@gmail.com

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