

Pictures and Statues (Review) Country Club affirms the relevance of the handmade

By Matt Morris
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With more than 25 artists, Country Club's current exhibition Pictures and Statues serves as a massive visual "think tank" that questions the relevance of traditional art methods — the painstaking use of physical materials and handmade objects — in a world where life increasingly is experienced through mass-produced items and virtual communications. The latter includes images uploaded onto the Internet or cell phones.

The artists are from all over the country, which is an ideal "staycation" way to see contemporary art from all over just by making a trip to the Oakley gallery.

Despite the looming possibility that many of the conventional working methods artists have employed for centuries — painting, sculpted or constructed objects, drawings — face obsolescence in light of today's fast-paced technological advances, Pictures and Statues isn't really about aesthetic doomsday. The title of the show implies reassurance, maybe somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that these practices, though updated, are alive and well.

The far wall of the gallery is a montage of different drawings by artists. Throughout the show, artists working with very similar materials and ideas are grouped; the effect is less emphasis on individual makers. In New York artist Adam McEwen's witty "Untitled Text Msg" pieces, the artist has drawn text messages in graphite onto grid paper, mimicking the pixilation of a slightly outdated cell phone, but asserting the simple handiwork of an artist and a pencil.

Karl Haendel's nearby "Untitled (Black Wave)" is an immensely enlarged page from a newspaper, also rendered in pencil — text, images and all. The news stories on the page report debates about our origins (academics disagreeing over Darwinism) and our inevitable fates (possible outer-space threats that scientists worry could kill us all). This Los Angeles artist's crisp, detached piece reminds us of the unclear past and future for our civilization and of the hand of the artist. It's a humble, humanistic observation.

Our present age's wars and technologically upgraded military operations are only made explicit by a couple of artists, though throughout the exhibition there is perhaps an underlying panic about what we accept as givens. New York artist Lisi Raskin's "Monument," draws these worries to a head. A piece of artillery has been shoddily rendered in scraps of plywood and coats of danger-symbolizing orange latex paint.

To call it a prop would be overdoing it, as Raskin's object is almost an abstraction of a weapon of mass destruction. For me, that's the point. It's not real.

I most appreciated several artists whose work touts a strange spirituality, at once sincere, ironic and skeptical. For example, Dan Attoe's (a Portland, Ore., artist) miniature oil paintings contain fanciful, darkly funny narratives set in fairytale forests and floating island fortresses.

In his 7-inch "Apeshit," an All Seeing Eye issues quips on how artists should live their lives: "Go apeshit and make everything that comes to mind for the next 5-20 years. Now turn around and get away from me."

The pseudo-spiritual is best represented in Shana Moulton's (currently based in New York) video works on view. "Whispering Pines 9" opens with a woman watching Antiques Roadshow on public television before setting out on a quest for personal wholeness. Walking through a labyrinth, the character's legs have been masked out. By this action, she has made a funny and startling representation of "cultural dematerialization" — the way details of our lives are stored on computers and communicated through un-real spaces like Facebook or eBay. The risk of this kind of technological age is that we might lose track of ourselves.

Moulton's videos might not have the purist remove from our technological age that the paintings and drawings in the show might boast, but her strangely mystical narratives seem to offer a creative out for those who may feel suffocated by society's supposed advancements.

Pictures and Statues responds to a sensed need for affirmation that the art world is about more than money, art fairs and new technological genres. Artists are still making things. While that seems obvious, specifically addressing it with such a strong lineup of clever makers has resulted in a very fine show and an interestingly open-ended conversation about our present.