

At the Henry: Young artists having fun, then and now

by Matthew Kangas

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Three exuberant, youthful exhibitions at the Henry Art Gallery of the University of Washington offer striking comparisons of how young people once felt about art and how they are dealing with it today. “Doug Aitken: interiors,” “Playtime” and “A Cup-Sized History of West Coast Ceramics, 1950s-1970s” all feature the work of American and international artists in their 20s and 30s.

Aitken’s ambitious video installation is compelling, but not for everyone. If you have a hearing impairment of any sort, watch the film from the gallery stairway and then walk down around the see-through screens. With a comfortable viewing lounge at its center, the cruciform layout of “interiors” sets the stage for the shifting imagery and points of view. Hallways, rooms, tunnels, classrooms, factories and space capsules are all some of the interiors Aitken uses. Young people of many races and nations are caught in close-up during the approximately 28-minute film. While stimulating and thought-provoking, the overall slick production values of “interiors” make it look like an ad for United Colors of Benetton.

Far more accessible and materially satisfying, “Playtime” has been organized by new assistant curator Sara Krajewski. Her curatorial debut is a charming mix of new acquisitions that bounces off the theme of childhood. Drawing on chief curator Elizabeth Brown’s ties to Los Angeles, several Southern California artists like Nicole Eisenman and Deborah Brown are included.

Larry Mantello’s fantastic “Bonita Bonanza” (1993) is the show’s centerpiece, a big, multicolored assemblage of suspended commercial pet toys. Also using found objects, “The New Achievers (of Seas and Space)” (1985) by Jon Kessler is a hilarious transformation of a Mr. Coffee machine into a bizarre sculpture complete with viewer-activated sound and flashing lights. Donald Moffett’s “Genius” (1991), using a see-through bowling ball bag, rounds out the assemblages.

But wait, there’s more, as the man in the infomercial says. Deborah Brown reconfigures an action figure into “Wailing Tiger Diva” (1994), which is too wacky to describe here (but see it above).

Finally, a videotape by the Swiss duo Fischli & Weiss, “The Way Things Go” (2001), is a helpful contrast to Aitken’s “interiors.” Completely planned, staged and timed, the artists filmed an entire set of Rube Goldberg-type contraptions of their making that is set in motion, lit on fire, doused in water and destroyed in a 30-minute tape.

Witty and often brilliantly executed, the art of “Playtime” summons up the sinister side of childhood, too, and this is part of its overall strength. Generation Zero (artists under 30) may never want to grow up, but this group sees the underside of perpetual adolescence, too.

The art-historical survey of ceramic cups is drawn from the Henry’s permanent collection of works donated by UW professors R. Joseph and Elaine Monsen, now considered among the top clay collectors in the nation. Currently engrossed in photography (which they have also given to the Henry), the Monsens’ first focus was clay. Collections curator Judy Sourakli chose 22 works in the form of a cup to demonstrate how West Coast artists used the cup as a departure point for sculptural

expressions.

Many of the big names of 1960s ceramics are represented by diminutive examples. Marilyn Levine's "Zipper Mug" looks like real leather. Clair Colquitt's "Cups #1 and #2" and Vicki Smith's "Finger Cup" use intimate body parts in place of handles. Clayton Bailey's "Gorilla Mug" dances between fine art and souvenir kitsch. Most playful and edgy of all are David Gilhooly's beautiful "Frog Attacking Giant Fly Cup" and his unbelievably gruesome (and funny) "Suicide Frog."