



Borderland • Boundary Creatures

July 18-August 29, 2004

Johnson County Community College • Jewish Museum/Village Shalom



Mie Yim, *Ni-Na-No*, 2004, pastel and paint installation, 12 x 23', courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York, N.Y. • Borderland

Two exhibitions jointly organized between Johnson County Community College Gallery of Art and the Jewish Museum.

After having remained at the entry [of a grotto] some time, two contrary emotions arose in me, fear and desire – fear of the threatening dark grotto, desire to see whether there were any marvelous things within it.

– Leonardo da Vinci

One of the best ways to understand the grotesque is to look at the rich associations of its namesake: the grotto. The grotto is associated with fertility and the womb, as well as with death and the grave. It is earthy and material, a cave, an open mouth that invites our descent into other worlds. It is also a space where the monsters and marvels of our imagination are conceived. While the grotesque pushes us beyond the boundaries of the world we know, it also reminds us of our limits and our own mortality. Confronting the grotto, Leonardo is torn between fascination and dread. The grotesque, too, provokes responses as contradictory as its meanings, fusing humor with horror, outrage with empathy, repulsion with fascination.

Mie Yim's monumental wall installation *Ni-Na-No* looks nothing like our expectations of the grotesque. The sweetness and innocence of green meadows and adorable cartoon creatures invite us into this childlike idyll, but our delight quickly turns to alarm. The expectations we bring to this hyper-cute imagery abruptly unravel as we begin to comprehend the mayhem depicted. Like the wolf dressed in grandma's nightgown, *Ni-Na-No* plays upon our expectations to lure us in and then summarily gobble us up. Caught in this borderland, hovering between the irreconcilable states of childlike fantasy and violent adult realities, we begin to understand that the grotesque is far more complex than we first imagined.

Min Kim's delicately wrought compositions draw us into a similarly ambiguous terrain. Viewing this sweet idyll of innocence and beauty, we soon begin to wonder why we feel a sense of unease and trepidation. Certainly troubling is the plant life springing from the girl's body. Although the cues all seem to point to an Eden-like oneness with nature, it is impossible to shake off the associations with death and decay. An even more subtle tension tugs at our consciousness – something about those doe-like, staring eyes, stereotypes of childhood innocence. But these eyes already know too much, revealing a self-awareness and emergent sexuality at odds with everything we are led to believe.

The grotesque defies any kind of neat categorization, especially since its forms and meanings are in constant flux. The grotesque is not so much a particular style or type of subject as it is a modality, simultaneously transgressive and transformative. Perhaps the best way to understand the grotesque is to conceive of it as a boundary creature. Carlee Fernandez's combinatory creations, like the *White Pigeon with Saffron Finch*, exemplify the stubborn ambiguity of the boundary creature. She confronts us with beasts that are simultaneously beautiful and mutant, mutilated and figured. The birds retain their separate identities, but they are hopelessly conjoined, and yet not enough to create a totally new and independent creature. Even more shocking is Fernandez's combination of animate with inanimate, or flora with fauna. The boar's head backpack is disturbing and darkly funny. The interweaving of rabbit and tangerines finds strange beauty in death, and juxtaposes the animal's lifelikeness with the new plant life feeding upon its body. Three different expressions, but each finds its meaning in the borderlands where these realities open into one another.

Ken Price's *Green Glow* is just as much a boundary creature. It appears to be a miniature, undulant landscape with its own grotto, but at the same time seems to be an organism with suggestive protuberances and orifices. It has an animated formlessness that is both sexually charged and hilarious. *Green Glow* gives form to Mikhail Bakhtin's famous description of the grotesque, that it is "a body in the act of becoming . . . never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body." Edward Lipski's psychedelic *Boat* also seems to be in the midst of metamorphosis, its body a composite of whale and boat, topped with upright forms which sprout periscopes and other bizarre sensors. Fabulously unseaworthy, this vessel is completely covered with patterns, words and images in retro-psychedelic style and color.

Like a minotaur, a mermaid or a cyborg, the grotesque is not quite one thing or the other, and this boundary creature roams the borderlands of all that is familiar and conventional. Put another way, we perceive something as grotesque by what it does to boundaries. It literally destabilizes boundaries of forms, with exaggeration, fusion, aberration and metamorphosis; but the grotesque also ruptures the boundaries of familiar realities, established conventions and aesthetic taste.



Edward Lipski, *Boat*, 2003, mixed materials, 40 x 48 x 15", courtesy Alan Koppel Gallery, Chicago, Ill. and Artemis Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, New York, N.Y. • Borderland



Thomas Trosch, *Hollywood Party*, 2003, oil on canvas, 50 x 48", courtesy of the artist and Fredericks Freiser Gallery, New York, N.Y. • Borderland

Viewers might ask why many of these works do not look grotesque, particularly in the case of pieces in the Jewish Museum exhibition. The answer lies more with our narrow expectations of that category than with the artistic expression. Today we typically use the word "grotesque" to describe something particularly horrible or disgusting, but it was not always so. In fact, the term was first used around 1500 to describe the fanciful inventions of Roman decorative art, wall paintings where humans, plants, architectural elements and mythical creatures were repeatedly combined into *groteschi*. This formal improvisation and fantasy was appropriated by mannerist artists who pushed the boundaries of style and representation. The sophisticated wit and inventive creatures that animate the compositions of Joan Miró or Paul Klee continue this tradition.

It is this stream of the grotesque that connects to most of the artists in the *Boundary Creatures* exhibition. Anthony Baab's architectural fantasies bolt free

from functional design, morphing and mutating into something far different from what was intended. In contrast to Baab's intense focus, Lynus Young spins out a darker fantasy on a wall-sized scale, but undercuts its apocalyptic message with off-handed improvisation and humor. Jaimie Warren's photographs of friends, food and animals have an unstudied immediacy in their own right, but it is her juxtaposition of images with no logical connection that takes the viewer into a fun-house world of allusions and associations. Rie Egawa and Burgess Zbryk present a whimsical fusion of high aesthetic and utilitarian materials. As it snakes along the wall, *Assorted Flavors* keeps diverting our attention from its actual function as a lighting fixture with its creature-like meanderings and camouflage as sculpture.

Wit plays a key role in Jordan Nickel's *American SkyScope*, a piece that torpedoes its own apparent homage to Barnett Newman's pure abstraction with the intrusion of a thick, yellow extension cord and the wall of imitation brick.



Virgil Ortiz, *Horny Toad*, 2003, clay, 28 x 14 x 10", collection Joseph and Janet Marchiani, Canon City, Colo. • Borderland



Carlee Fernandez, *Lola Isern* (from the Friends Series), 2001, altered taxidermic animal, 40 x 25 x 24" collection Acuna-Hansen Gallery, Los Angeles, Calif. • Borderland

These vivid color planes appear to be quite literally electric, that is, until we realize that the attached cord is a ruse, serving only to subvert our expectations. Happy Rice undercuts our expectations of language, giving abstract characters a strange physicality. *Daft* plays with intersecting but disjunctive commas, one a flat, painted shape and the other a large sculptural form. Their inverted arrangement is emblematic of the reversals and surprises throughout Rice's installation, where every expectation is trumped and our trust in the efficacy and accuracy of the written word is called into question.

Kaz Oshiro's *Trash Bin # 6* resembles an update of the Duchamp readymade, but we soon see that this, too, is a masquerade. It is not actually one of the ubiquitous trash receptacles for fast food, but crafted in every banal detail to look like one, right down to imitation faux woodgrain, and the anonymous "Thank You" directed at anyone who shoves trash into its mouth. Oshiro's deadpan presentation makes this very familiar object strange, particularly when you consider that within the fast food universe it is somehow normal, even appropriate, to express your thanks to departing guests on a trash can.

While the *Boundary Creatures* exhibition runs more to the capriccio, with its witty subversions and improvisations on artistic conventions, *Borderland* embraces the carnivalesque, showcasing the role of the artist-provocateur. Coming from the medieval carnival tradition, this populist version of the grotesque is full-bodied, funny and deliberately subversive. During the period of carnival (preceding Lent) anything powerful or sacrosanct could be mocked; the world could be turned upside-down and roles reversed, if only for a short time. The carnivalesque draws upon the material world, and while it can be satirical, scatological or bawdy, it almost always has a social critique hidden within its laughter.

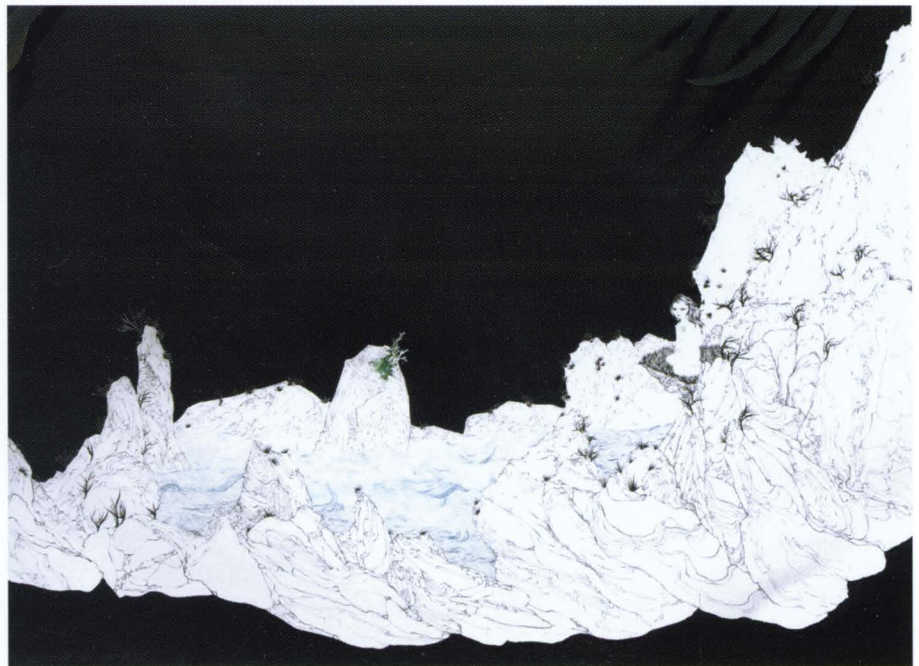
The large clay sculptures by Virgil Ortiz draw upon his cultural and family tradition of making Cochiti Pueblo *munos*, or storytelling figures. These comical figures were made by the Pueblo Indians in the latter 19th century as sharp and often satirical observations of Anglo and Mexican outsiders and paid particular attention to people who lived on the fringe of normality, including cowboys, opera singers and carnival acts (such as bearded ladies and Siamese twins). Interestingly, Ortiz embraces a type of expression that was typically rejected by art collectors as

impure, tainted by outside influences. His imagery plays upon multiple levels of the carnivalesque: the broad physical comedy, the outsider subjects themselves, and the outsider viewpoint as well. This outsider vantage point has turned upside down as well, from the 19th-century American Indian parodies of outsiders, to contemporary American Indian as minority outsider to American culture and the fine arts world.

Thomas Trosch parodies an extremely different world, that of the moneyed leisure of the wealthy. His lavishly painted work channels the extravagant luxury of his subjects, who inhabit worlds where hot tubs and expensive contemporary paintings are packed cheek-by-jowl with gourmet food, designer women and designer clothes. Trosch's work has been compared to Florine Stettheimer's depictions of high society, but his painting style might best be described as a weird fusion of Pierre Bonnard's intensely decorative interiors with James Ensor's garish colors, deliberately crude brushwork and wicked satire. The unabashed materiality of Trosch's style and subjects is contradicted by a strange ephemerality, as if the whole pampered dream is on the verge of dissolution.

A prevailing theme in these two exhibitions is that of subversive laughter. Any expectation or convention is fair game. But there is a less visible theme of excess, pushing something beyond accepted boundaries to the point of grotesquerie. Trosch's slathered paintings of conspicuous consumption bump up against Oshiro's deadpan monument to fast trash, satires of highbrow and lowbrow American excess. Mie Yim's childlike playland disturbs us because it becomes too real. Telling us far more than we want to know, Fernandez's leather backpack confronts us with an excessive display of its animal origins, and refusing to let its functional design cut away the identity of the creature whose skin it is. Whether subversive undertow or over-the-top excess, the grotesque is always working to dislodge us from the fixed and familiar and to ask us to consider realities just beyond what we know.

Frances S. Connelly, Art History
University of Missouri-Kansas City



Min Kim, *Maybe the Darkness will Change into a Giant* (detail on right), 2003-4, pencil, watercolor, acrylic on paper and mylar, 89 x 82" collection Dennis Freedman, New York, N.Y. • *Borderland*

Cover: Mie Yim, *Ni-Na-No* (detail), 2004, pastel and paint installation, 12 x 23', courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York, N.Y. • *Borderland*

Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art • Carlsen Center • 12345 College Blvd., Overland Park, KS 66210