

An Uncomfortably Small, and Shrinking, World



IMAGES COURTESY OF MARINA ZURKOW

Nothing draws people together like a crisis. The reigning global conversation at the moment — if one is to judge by newspaper headlines — is about the worldwide economic mess. Before that, however, the state of our environment dominated our collective consciousness. It is this second issue that

is addressed in “Marina Zurkow: Friends, Enemies and Others” at the Montclair Art Museum.

Fitting the global nature of our eco-quandary, Ms. Zurkow’s work encompasses a variety of geographic regions, and the aesthetic upon which she bases her animations and their accompanying prints is culled from a global range of art history sources. The message one might take from this broad-based approach is that it’s an uncomfortably small world after all.

ART REVIEW

MARTHA SCHWENDENER



WORLD VIEWS Above, an image from “Slurb,” an 18-minute animated video by Marina Zurkow, commissioned by the city of Tampa. Left, a winter image from the series “Mesocosm.”

Works from Ms. Zurkow’s series “Crossing the Waters” from 2006 to 2009 are inspired by the effect of climate change on the world’s oceans, which connect and affect us all. “Weights and Measures,” from 2007, a simple, nearly three-minute digital animation, shows different objects and organisms floating in a deep blue, oceanic background. There are swimming elephants drawn in white outline, airplanes and iridescent green shapes conjuring plankton or other primordial sea creatures — as well as cross-sections of human skulls.

Opposite this video is “Slurb,” an animation from 2009 commissioned by the city of Tampa that conflates the words “slum” and “suburb” in its title. A slow,

hypnotic loop lasting nearly 18 minutes, the video is accompanied by an ambient-electronic soundtrack that includes a high-pitched Theremin — an eerie-sounding instrument that was a staple of 1950s science fiction movies. Visually, the video draws heavily from contemporary Asian sources, specifically Japanese manga and anime (comics and animation), which derive partly from Japanese woodcuts and the Chinese painting tradition.

“Slurb” includes flat, bold-colored figures in Asian-style boats paddling past half-submerged cars, trailers, bridges and tires. Seagulls fly overhead, toxic clouds waft through the scene, and mermaids and sirenlike figures provide an otherworldly aura to a flooded, postapocalyptic city.

Two more animations from the four-video series “Elixir” that is part of “Crossing the Waters” are displayed on the lawn outside the museum. Both have orbs, suggesting perfume bottles, drawn in transparent outline at the center of their frames. “Elixir III” from 2009 shows a giant revolving perfume bottle placed in the middle of a crashing surf. Inside, a woman, also drawn in outline, flaps a pair of handmade wings in an attempt to fly.

The turning bottle in “Elixir IV,” also from 2009, is set in an icy waterscape. Inside this one is the outline of a male figure, a diver twisting and turning in the bottle. With their unlikely juxtapositions of figures and locales and their use of outline drawing, both works recall paintings of David Salle that also relied on a jarring pastiche of images and sources.

The centerpiece of the show is a new series titled “Friends and Enemies,” which includes prints and the digital animation “Mesocosm (Northumberland, UK)” from 2011. The video is 146 hours long, playing in a looping cycle — which eliminates the pressure to watch the whole thing. (One downside of video is that you often feel guilty when you watch only a portion of it.) A black-and-white animation, with washes reminiscent of aquatint printing techniques, “Mesocosm” features a particular landscape — Northumberland in northern England — drawn in solid shapes and calligraphic outlines reminiscent of Asian painting and prints, as well as of contemporary comics, graphic novels and animated films.

Sometimes the “Mesocosm” landscape, with a landfill sketchily outlined in the background, is left to the elements. At other times, it is occupied by a large,

nude male, borrowed from a Lucian Freud painting of the Australian-born performance artist Leigh Bowery. A pudgy earth father, seen mostly from behind, he sits through the seasons on a tree stump, surrounded by flora and fauna, decay and regeneration.

A series of accompanying prints provides a framework for the epic animation, showing how it cycles through the seasons. If you want to know the moment at which you are arriving on the scene, the upper-right-hand corner of the central image displays the hour, day and month depicted in the video.

The last group of works in the show is a series of prints that, while skillfully designed, are a little hokey and obvious. The “Heraldic Crests for Invasive Species” are black-and-white letterpress prints featuring non-native animals that have invaded northern England: the European rabbit, the zebra mussel, the mitten crab, the North American signal crayfish, and plants like Japanese knotwood and Himalayan balsam. Underneath outlined images of the animals incorporated into heraldic crests are Latin slogans like “Velox et vindex” (“Swift and vengeful,” under the bullfrog) or “Ex nihilo nihil fit” (“Nothing comes from nothing,” under the North American gray squirrel). They link nature and culture in terms of their drives toward conquest, legitimacy and — particularly with the use of Latin, a dead language — extinction.

This is the first exhibition in the Montclair Art Museum’s New Directions program, which showcases contemporary art and is an exciting and promising development. Thanks in part to a glut of graduate programs across the country, there are thousands of innovative and highly trained contemporary artists living today whose works deserve to be seen.

Ms. Zurkow, who is a 2011 Guggenheim fellow, is a good example of an artist hooked into the advanced conversations within her field and the world at large. At the same time, her work takes sophisticated discourses and boils them down to rather simplistic results. She is a safe choice for a museum speaking to a wide audience. (As many contemporary artists have remarked, this is also an issue with the Guggenheim Fellowships program: it favors artists who are high-minded, but not too rigorous or controversial.)

Much of this tendency toward conservatism, which can be seen in museums at large, stems from the “culture wars” of

the 1980s and 1990s, in which government arts subsidies were cut, curators became targets of litigation, and museums were fearful of mounting shows that might get them in trouble with politicians or citizens.

These reservations notwithstanding, Ms. Zurkow’s appearance at the Montclair Art Museum and the museum’s hiring last year of Alexandra Schwartz as curator of contemporary art are welcome developments. This is especially true in a world sorely in need of creative ideas and solutions. And it is a potent reminder that artists are a species that is thriving, rather than going extinct.

“Marina Zurkow: Friends, Enemies and Others” is on view through March 18, 2012, at the Montclair Art Museum, 3 South Mountain Avenue, Montclair; montclairartmuseum.org or (973) 746-5555.



Montclair Art Museum

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