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GALLERIES

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Playing with perception

Oliver Lutz's multimedia works examine hidden layers of humanity

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent | December 6, 2007

Oliver Lutz's smart, dark, and disarmingly magical exhibit at Space Other lets you see paintings that don't appear to be there. The bells and whistles alone are captivating, but Lutz employs them to beckon the unwitting viewer into the charged spectacle of a public lynching. He based his paintings on early 20th century photographs.

Lutz, who last year got his masters degree in visual arts at MIT, uses closed-circuit video and infrared reflectography, a method developed in the late 1960s that enables art historians to examine hidden layers in paintings. Infrared radiation can make the outer skin of a painting appear transparent.

Lutz's installation "Lynching II" features an enormous, skillfully wrought painting of two black men hanging by the neck from a pole. The canvas stretches out on either side of them in inky black, an evocation of death, despair, and isolation.

Video monitors litter the floor, each attached to a closed-circuit camera equipped with infrared technology and focused at the painting. Each monitor reveals the under-painting, which our eyes can't perceive under that blanket of black: gawking spectators, all white, their faces filled with hatred. Lutz envelops the viewer in the scene; as we turn our back to the painting to look at the monitors, the cameras capture us, too, as if at the front of the mob. Complicit.

In "Lynching I," a smaller installation, the visible painting shows the mob; the glossy black above their heads hides the hanged men, as revealed in the monitor across from the painting. That transparent slick of black paint carries even more meaning once we see through it: It's denial, fear, the very stuff that separates us from others. It is seemingly impenetrable, until you shine the right kind of light on it, really look at what's going on, and see your own part in it.

Also at Space Other, Vargas-Suarez Universal's obsessively, intricately patterned drawings and paintings play with space in more ways than one. Many reference satellites and space stations; his flashy, dramatic "Event Horizon" is painted in bold black and white swirls and shimmering silver lines on three satellite dishes.

These are fun, but what Universal does with the illusion of space in his large-scale paintings is more ambitious and compelling. In "Principia Americanus," he paints in black and white over varnished wood, with a dense series of crisscrossing lines and blunt passages. Depth and surface flirt and seem to exchange places in an instant.

Stories on canvas

Painter Mariana López also plays with perception in riddling ways in her show at Rhys Gallery; unlike Universal, she packs her works with narrative. "Babies" shows several infants lined up in a trough in a laboratory (or is it an abattoir?); a white-coated woman has her back to us. López torques perspective, so the trough curves and the shiny, tiled floor seems to spill out at us.

The painting technique is expert. López deploys different conceits on each canvas. In "Back of Seated Man," she has us in a dark room with a man and a boy, but the focus is the far wall, hung with countless buoys but filled with cracks through which we glimpse a far-off urban landscape. All of her paintings are deeply unsettling and ambitious; some are too jam-packed to make sense of.

Jessalyn Haggenjos's sculpture and painting installations, also at Rhys, evoke space debris and nebulae, with spotty success. Haggenjos makes ugly orbs with materials such as styrofoam and suspends them in front of passages of bright, swirling poured paint. Some of her little meteors don't have the painted background, and they just seem to sit there; the added dimension of the backdrop is a must.