

Art Review in The Courier Journal

Sunday, August 19, 2007

'Body' exhibit contemplates human pain

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Kiki Smith famously defused Cartesian anxiety about 10 years ago with her large print, "How I Know I'm Here." It's grand to see this sprightly feminist icon by the German-born New York artist in an exhibition titled "Body Anxious."

The stack of four horizontal black and white linoleum prints show an outlined human figure winking, sniffing, chewing and patting overlaid with images of giant-sized, isolated organs such as a brain, lungs, a heart and ovaries, which are important to note because that is how we know it's a girl knowing she is here. The print is witty and wry enough to stabilize the set of unbalanced emotions otherwise cultivated by this exhibit, which is deliberately about bodily pain, that being a common denominator in what curator Jesse Levesque calls "our shared precarious biological condition."

Anxiety is nothing new to any age, although the point not made emphatically enough in the show may be that only in recent years has art been so inclined to graphically embrace images of anxiety, pain, suffering and human decline. Recent is defined as occurring after or under the impact of such things as the advent of photography, the nearly worldwide consciousness of Nazi atrocities upon humans, the feminist movement, the World Wide Web and the acceptance of the comic and the fantastical as being as valid as anything "real life" can throw at you.

In this atmosphere of layered realities, you can contemplate the horror of surreal tools for female medicine created by Cristin Millett of Pennsylvania as slightly silly. They include things like an "Expandable Vaginal Speculum" made of a wing-handled corkscrew with a pair of duck-billed, brass shoe horns on the business end, and a so-terrible-it's-almost-funny "Retractable Amniotome" assembled from a seam ripper and sewing gauge.

You can contemplate the odd bits of decorated, decaying fruits and vegetables that Diana Falchuk of Seattle has stitched together as what critic Harold Rosenberg called "anxious objects." The term was coined to describe contemporary art that tends to look like a precious object or "art," but simultaneously rejects that label by being, in this case, transient.

Certainly, the image of a man in a hospital bed in a compound photo by James R. Southard of Louisville is simply and compassionately about human passing and grief.

Certainly, the photo of a woman seated on a bed nearly obscured in a prison of black string is just an uneasy dream made physically real in the performance art of Osaka-born Chiharu Shiota of Berlin.

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But what does the hyper-realism of Austrian-born, Irish-based artist Gottfried Helnwein say to us and about us in the context of "Body Anxious?" His work is what puts this show on the map of bodily pain and anxiety. He has painted a hyper-realistic, oversized portrait of a little girl in a pink-and-white undershirt, her head and eyes swathed in gauze so recently wrapped that it glistens with blood. It is from Helnwein's "Los Caprichos" series, named after the famous Goya series. Art historians say Goya's "Caprichos" mark the beginning of the modern world of art because they were the first to look at, rather than avoid or symbolize, pain, fantasy, cruelty, disloyalty and any other number of grievous human traits.

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