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Romantic Notions at Los Caminos

LAURA ELIZABETH SHEA on 11 November, 2011 at 11:51

[uds-billboard name="romanticnotions"]How *do* you know when it is really love? How is romance measured and where do we get these answers from, anyway? At Los Caminos, curator Cecilia Vargas presents four contemporary artists' responses to how and why we view romantic love the way we do, offering insight and questions into how our own disillusionment plays out in actual relationships.

Helen Maurene Cooper's two photographs are the only figurative works in the show, a telling fact in an exhibition about human constructions of romance. *Deep Inside Crystal Lake*, named after a blonde porn star of the same name, shows a grey-haired man, fit, and in a Speedo, kissing a blonde, topless woman, on the shore of a lake. The way the couple awkwardly embraces, she on her tiptoes, and he, his hand unnaturally laying upon her hip, at first makes them seem like a viable couple. But everything else – their too-perfect wigs, the overly picturesque photographic framing of the greenery, and the knowledge that they are posing for a camera, makes their encounter seem counterfeit, difficult to accept. In showing a forged intimacy, Cooper catches us in the act of looking at them – of believing them, for even a second, to be genuine. Similarly, *Cat tails* (2007) depicts a couple sporting smooth and silky wigs and embracing in an idealized landscape of pure, unspoiled fields of gently blowing wheat. With *Cat tails*, we are again caught in naïve, voyeurism, believing theirs to be a pure human love, leaving us disdainful of what we lack (however unlikely cuddling up with a lover in a wheat field may be).

Husband and wife, Chicago-based collaborative, Sarah and Joesph Belknap present love and romance strictly symbolically. In the sculpture *Me and You and You and Me* (2011), a green wall divides a foot-high pile of sand on one side and foam-like, painted red 'bricks' on the other, offering a male-female, culture-nature dichotomy (man-made bricks separated from natural sand). The division, emphasized by the wall, signifies daily misunderstandings or barriers due to gender, or rather roles accepted uncritically. In three canvases entitled *Week one out of eight*, *Week two out of eight* and *Week three out of eight* (all 2011), the Belknaps depict couples who agreed to wear a GPS tracking device for a week through dots that represent their movement. Each individual in the couple is represented by a different color and the work results in a kind of map (or something darker, like evidence) of the time they traveled in space as individuals and as couples.

Finally, Brooklyn-based Amanda Browder's installation, *Proxy Vacation* (originally 2010, recreated 2011) consists of a large, bright green and multicolored-patched blanket hanging from the wall and onto the floor, accompanied by a picnic basket and half-eaten baguette –

the makings of a romantic picnic, that oh-so-popular literary and artistic theme of a lover's escape. The blanket's backdrop is a large montage of black and white photographs of scenery, trains and cafes – basically, the sights and happenings of the couple, first done in Prague, who took a proxy vacation for the artist, herself unable to make it to the city for the Biennial. The fabric blanket they bring along, as shown in the photos, represents the artist's subconscious, and her own idealization of an unfulfilled cross-continental travel with a loved one. She can safely exist in blanket form, rather than participating in the actual, often overwhelming and stressful experience of travel with loved ones.

Showing in the Cherokee Street apartment gallery Los Caminos, the exhibition feels at home here, much more so than at an institution which itself might be a bulwark for the simplified, safe versions of love. The works are shown in the kind of kitchen/living space that we might have, as children, first watched the films or read the books that implanted our early, enchanted dreams of love. Yet, it is also the kind of space- small, sparse, post-collegiate – that such romanticized notions give way to fights with a partner, disappointed and frustrated, wondering what went wrong.

Romantic Notions *continues at Los Caminos on 2649 Cherokee Street, Saint Louis, MO 63118 through December 3rd, 2011.*

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