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Dead Animals Liven Up 'Little Creatures'

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For some time now I've awaited the passing of twee, childlike drawing into artistic oblivion.

I'm still waiting. Naive renderings of fanciful characters encamped on bare pages of Arches heavyweight paper continue to fill our galleries. Through Jan. 14, specimens of the type are on view in Transformer's four-person group show "Little Creatures."

If this exhibition had a soundtrack, it would be composed by a fey indie band like Belle and Sebastian. The show's themes — anomie and loneliness, regression to childhood, studied artlessness — are explored in ink or mixed-media works on paper by three of the artists. Each renders the forms of animals and animal-like humans as a child might; their expressions communicate boredom with their own ennui. To the credit of artist Marci Branagan, the show's only non-draftsman, her fabric objects partly redeem "Little Creatures." But even these can't salvage a show so entranced with self-consciousness.

The problem here isn't that the work is shoddy or out of tune. To the contrary, these images are thought-out and resemble, too closely perhaps, menu items from alternative galleries nationwide. The problem is that the show fails to ask hard questions.

An educated eye will find it all too easy to spot these artists' influences. The clean lines and exaggerated features of Japanese animation show up in the kewpie-doll-eyed girls of Maki Maruyama's watercolors. Thomas Lowery's drawings of masked youth are ringers for Yoshitomo



Thomas Lowery's "But, I Don't Love You," in Transformer's four-artist show, is part of the gallery fad of little naive-looking drawings.

Nara's ubiquitous goblin-mopets, themselves riffs on Japonism. The pages of children's books seem to inspire Julie Jenkinson's drawings and charcoals.

To show the influence of artistic predecessors is itself no crime. Yet Maruyama, Lowery and Jenkinson don't give us much that's new. Maruyama enhances his anime girls by drawing feathery, jagged loops around their mouths as if suggesting stilted communication; this minor innovation feels tacked on. Lowery tweaks Nara by adding captions suggesting the futility of his characters' lives: "I want to tell you I love you, but I don't love you." Yet these textual supplements simply add to the weight of his picture's futility. Some of Jenkinson's circus animals have expressions more ferocious than

those in picture books; still, they remain suitable for a young person's story time.

As if assigned to save this show from its own charms, in walks Branagan with a suite of work that complements even as it subverts. Her fabric pieces include a collection of pint-size faux pelts that look like stuffed animals minus their fibrous innards. Included among them are cute rabbit heads sewn at their edges with bright red thread. Arranged on ledges throughout the tiny gallery, they could be specimens from a kindergarten taxi-dermy class.

But just as our eyes adjust to the cuteness, Branagan throws a punch. The artist inserts the remains of a real squirrel — leathery flesh still clinging to its bones, its tail a peninsula of carti-

lage — and the plump body of a deceased sparrow into the ranks of her fabric pelts. Into both animals' eye sockets she has pasted playful google eyes.

The gesture of adding eyes normally reserved for children's playthings seems an attempt to transform death into something almost lighthearted — a sweet effort even in failure. Ultimately, though, it's an act as simple as that squirrel body that wakes us from the "Little Creatures" group mope.

Schechet, Sherwood and Bocchino at Hemphill

In Arlene Schechet's elegant, spare installation at Hemphill, a crystal rope snakes around the front room as if on a leisurely stroll around the gallery's perimeter. This installation, alongside a small group of shiny crystal vessels and a selection of works on paper, set a tranquil tone to her latest series, called "Round & Round."

In a well-orchestrated trick of the eye, the rope appears to penetrate the wall, snake behind its surface and then return for air. Its blue color suggests ice, yet its skin retains the fibrous surface of the rope it was cast from, appearing almost oily when rendered in crystal. Though utterly immobile, the material assumes a fluidity under Schechet's watch, as if giving visual form to paradox.

The rope installation leads to a group of crystal vessels arranged on waist-high metal pedestals. Each is made of hand-blown elements assembled like building blocks stacked one upon or inside the next (it's something like multiple lampshades over bulbs, though much more refined). Their rounded shapes echo pears or the domes of Is-

lamic architecture. Her reference to various kinds of buildings is intentional; Schechet's aim to balance without adhesive mimics Buddhist temple mounds.

Polite to the point of reserved, this work doesn't make waves. Still, as fodder for meditation, it offers the right amount of space for the mind to wander.

In Hemphill's rear room, paintings by Katherine Sherwood recall the tradition of alchemy and the art of medieval medicine. The artist copies pages from old medical texts, combining them with images of her own angiograms (the series was inspired by a stroke the artist suffered) and areas of poured paint. The resulting tension between abstraction and representation energizes this suite of works.

Installed in the gallery's walk-in alcove is the work of A.J. Bocchino, who strings together New York Times headlines from 1990 to 2005. Environmental issues, weapons of mass destruction and Clinton's impeachment all get space. The artist colors each headline segment according to theme — international and domestic issues, wars/conflicts, etc. — so that viewers can track themes as they move in and out of the spotlight. Such a tapestry of media coverage obliterates the headlines' original meanings even as it creates new ones.

Little Creatures at Transformer, 1404 P St. NW, Wednesday-Saturday, 1-7 p.m., 202-483-1102, through Jan. 14. The gallery hosts an artists' talk with Branagan, Lowery and Maruyama today at 4 p.m. www.transformergallery.org
Arlene Schechet, Katherine Sherwood and A.J. Bocchino at Hemphill Fine Arts, Tuesday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. 1515 14th St. NW, 202-234-5601, through Feb. 25. www.hemphillfinearts.com