

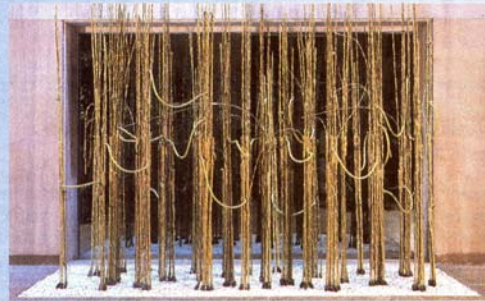
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Against nature

Two exhibitions at the Whitney's midtown branch highlight a younger generation's changed relationship to the world outdoors

By Peter Nagy



Alyson Shotz, *Mobile Flora*, 2000.

Set among midtown's skyscrapers, the Whitney Museum's clever pairing of exhibitions—one of photography, titled "Expanding Horizons," and the other of sculpture, titled "Pastoral Pop!"—follows a progression of ideas from one medium to another, and from one generation of artists to the next. "Expanding Horizons" is a concise show of landscape photography, culled from the museum's collection, that covers some familiar ground. The concept of nature as a cultural construct is all too familiar by now, and here we have the ironic, "simulationist" approach to the natural world. Hiroshi Sugimoto's well-known photo of an undersea diorama, and pastoral scenes constructed by Vik Muniz and Gregory Crewdson, are entirely ersatz dreamscapes created for the camera. Emmet Gowin's aerial view of a toxic-waste treatment plant and Sally Mann's close-up of dangling Spanish moss are abstractions cut loose from any human referent.

Even the more traditional pictures disclose a prepackaged, postmodern attitude. Sally Gall's four pictures of jungles (taken on three continents) are thick and soupy meldings of land and water, resembling fun-house mirror reflections. A souvenir-style shot of Central Park by Bruce Davidson is a wide-angle assortment of clichéd elements, composed according to an idealized, textbook notion of the picturesque.

"Pastoral Pop!" is the more ambitious endeavor, and occupies the atrium space. The Whitney commissioned six new sculptures and one painting from a group of artists, many as young as 30. These younger artists seem to embrace uncritically, as their own issues and ideas, what the more established photographers of "Expanded Horizons" approach ironically. The exhibition title's

reference to Pop Art applies more to the artists' infatuation with funky materials than to any sort of entertainment-industry imagery. In fact, this younger generation's interest in animal, vegetable and landscape forms could prompt one to see this as a school of Neo-Art Nouveau as much as anything else. Most of the works dovetail expertly with the architecture of the space, and curator Debra Singer seems to have discovered a cohesive burgeoning aesthetic.

Rob de Mar's sculpture titled *Somewhere* takes center stage: A futuristic, anti-gravity assortment of mini-evergreens, waterfalls, picnic spots and topiary, this is gee-whiz technical prowess married to cutesy Tinkertoy imagery. This *Jetsons*-like landscape segues nicely into Jason Middlebrook's *Flintstones*-inspired sculpture: chunky Styrofoam boulders planted with flowers and set into the atrium's windows, which overlook the sidewalk. From the street, the effect is something like an ant farm; you can see a subterranean landscape of roots and rocks on the boulders' hollowed-out insides. The natural history diorama appears again with Katrin Asbury's sculpture of a shrunken zoo habitat complete with a socializing pack of wolves. Less intriguing and more kitschy are Rachel Feinstein's hanging sculpture, Peter Gould's guard station and Lisa Ruyter's color-by-numbers painting of a (once again) clichéd Central Park scene. But Alyson Shotz's *Mobile Flora*, a grove of alien bamboo complete with casters and self-irrigating sprinklers, provides the perfectly creepy addition to this millennial garden.

"Expanding Horizons" is on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris through October 6; "Pastoral Pop!" is on view there through December 15 (see Museums & Institutions).