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Atlanta Journal-Constitution July 4, 2004

Section: Arts

Edition: Home; The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Page: M12

VISUAL ARTS: Outer space, inner workings

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EXHIBIT REVIEW – “Summer Solos 2004”

Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, 535 Means St., Atlanta. 404-688-1970.

Michael Oliveri makes some weird science in “Fast Food, Hydrocarbons and Waves in Outer Space.”

By which I mean that he was inspired by certain scientific discoveries and theories and the connections between them, but you’d never know it from looking at what resulted.

No matter. His four ambitious installations — video projections, glass sculptures and a hydroponic tomato garden — have a life of their own. Along with their visual pleasures, they dispense humor, nostalgia and wonder.

In one called “NASA Nourishment,” the University of Georgia professor has staged an exhibit that represents research into spacecraft agriculture. He is growing seeds for tomato plants in hydroponic contraptions he has built.

The installation looks like something you’d find at Epcot. You enter past an orange plastic curtain into a bright laboratory-like room with shiny Mylar-silver walls. All the growing units are white. It’s a pitch-perfect rendition of utopian ’50s futurism, which might evoke a smirk, but the system actually works. The seeds are growing — really fast. The Contemporary will have tomatoes by the end of the show.

Another gallery features clear glass sculptures shaped like molecules and filled with fluid. They rest on white Styrofoam platforms sculpted to look like the surface of Mars. A carbon molecule discovered in 1987 that may be a building block of the universe inspired their shape.

Viewers will probably see something less profound. In my case, the installation spoke to the way the vocabulary of science influenced modernist design. I could imagine these molecules as decanters in homes furnished with Eames chairs and Bertoia tables.

“Spaceship Earth,” a video projection in which the artist manipulated footage of ocean waves, is more accessible. The pulsing abstract composition in magenta, red and yellow can be enjoyed for its formal qualities and as a celebration of the grandeur and force of nature. The only object in the darkened room where it is showing is a circular clear plastic water bed nestled in the concavity of a satellite dish. Oliveri calls it “seating,” but it almost reads like an altar.

The fundamental feeling that bubbles through these installations is reverence, both for nature and for science.

Into the digital age

Prema Murthy is among the contemporary artists who speak the language of video games. She is more adept than most. In the digital prints and animation exhibited in “Space Invaders,” the Atlanta artist melds it with the language of fine art and injects her sci-fi imagery with subliminal pathos.

Murthy sets her enigmatic tableaux against a patent-leather-black background that suggests outer space. She suggests objects and architecture in drawings using vector lines inspired by old arcade games. Inserted into this minimal setting are faceless figures whose twisted torsos look as if they were made out of Play-Doh or summoned from the world of Salvador Dali.

In “Untitled (The Empire Strikes Back)” a pair of these figures (corpses?), illuminated by a searchlight from a spherical spaceship, floats in space. Beneath them is a rendition of the kind of canyon that

spaceship hurtled through in the “Star Wars” battle scenes. Exactly what has transpired here is up for grabs, but it can’t be good. The digital print hums with danger.

The baroque drama of Murthy’s work becomes almost literal in “Untitled (Star Wars).” The composition suggests Bernini’s sculpture “The Ecstasy of St. Teresa,” replete with the lines like the sunburst that are part of that 17th-century depiction of experiencing the godhead. Which is actually the motive behind her two animations. The eclectic artist, who draws on Buddhist paintings for the hierarchic compositions, intends them as meditative devices. They don’t work that way because they don’t transcend the connotations of the video-game genre.

Murthy sees her images of outer space as metaphors for inner space. Her challenge is to introduce emotional complexity into an arena better known for brutality and violence — as David Chase does successfully with the Mafia thugs in “The Sopranos.” She’s not quite there yet, but she’s made an intriguing start.

Photo:University of Georgia’s professor Michael Oliveri’s “NASA Nourishment,” representing spacecraft agriculture (above), is a pitch-perfect rendition of utopian ’50s futurism.