

At the College of New Rochelle, a Show Meant to Provoke Double Takes

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Pieces in the exhibition include "Green Screen II" (2007), by Greg Drasler. Credit Betty Cunningham Gallery

Entering the Castle Gallery at the College of New Rochelle, visitors encounter an arrangement of cherry blossoms in a glass vase. At least that's what it appears to be. Closer observation reveals that the branch holding the flowers is actually a segment of plumbing pipe and that each delicate bud is a tiny pink toilet made of urethane foam.

The unexpected bouquet is "Flores Illicis," a sculpture by David Opdyke that is among the pieces included in the gallery's current exhibition, "'Not Really': Fictive Narratives in Contemporary Art." The show addresses the proliferation of contrivance and manipulation in 21st-century society, asking gallerygoers to consider — and then reconsider — the 31 works on view. "'Not Really' " was assembled by Susan Canning, an independent curator and a professor of art history at the college. "The show is a response to a contemporary experience that is completely mediated and augmented," she said, citing reality television, Auto-Tuned music and images of models and celebrities that have been Photoshopped to perfection. "The artificial and the fake have become accepted as reality. I want viewers to question that reality and think twice about what they are seeing."

What they will see are paintings, sculptures, photographs, videos and installations that explore subjects as diverse as family, gender, the environment, consumerism and police brutality. The 14 participating artists, who range in age from their 30s to their 70s, employ elements of illusion, incongruity, humor and surprise in works with a shared premise: All is not as it seems. "I want people to look at each piece," Ms. Canning said, "and ask, 'What is really going on here? What is this really about?'"

Viewers are likely to wonder about Mac Adams's photograph "Colander." In it, a chrome colander set against a red background casts a realistic shadow but reflects a baffling scenario of a partially clothed man submerged in a pond, his body perforated by the utensil's holes. The image imbues the common kitchen tool with menace and disquiet, providing disjointed bits of information but withholding explanation.

Another photograph, "7:12 p.m. Redcliff Avenue," by Alex Prager, evokes a similar sense of mystery. It depicts a blond-haired woman in an orange skirt and a flowered blouse who is lying on a grid composed of telephone wires. Illuminated by an unidentified light source against an otherwise darkened sky, she rests gracefully, even glamorously, high above a crowd of men who gaze upward. Is it a prank? A tragedy? "You look at it and you look at it," Ms. Canning said, "and still you can't tell."

To look at Patrick Jacobs's meticulously constructed diorama "Common White Puffballs With Slime Mold," visitors must peer through a two-inch circular window of warped glass that has been set into the gallery wall. When they do, they discover a miniature natural landscape that stretches into the distance.



"Flores Illicis" (2012), by David Opdyke. Credit David Opdyke and Magnan Metz Gallery

A different kind of landscape is presented in "Stage Mountain," a large-scale painting of winding rivers and snow-capped mountains by Adam Cvijanovic. A network of wooden structures infiltrates this scenic panorama, plowing into it from above and below. "You can't tell if you're inside or outside, and your perspective is constantly shifting," Ms. Canning said. "You have this grand vista, but it's propped up by scaffolding. It's all an illusion."



"Colander" (2012), by Mac Adams Credit Mac Adams and Elizabeth Dee Gallery

Greg Drasler, one of the artists with work in the show, said he had been inspired by the illusory nature of Hollywood and, specifically, by the cutaway cars he saw while touring the former Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios there. "When the cameras were too big, they used these special cars that came apart so they could get the shot," he said. "I was taken with them because they were both interior and exterior at the same time."

Mr. Drasler went on to paint a series of the vehicles. In the two paintings on display, "Internal Combustion" and "Green Screen II," he set the cars against green screens, "where they can shoot a scene and then slip in the location at a later time," he explained.

The "Fictive Narratives" phrase used in the exhibition's title is exemplified by "The Syphilis of Sisyphus," a black-and-white video made by Mary Reid Kelley, with her husband, Patrick Kelley, in which Ms. Kelley plays a pregnant French bohemian. Her face heavily painted to resemble a skull, her eyes covered by circular black discs, she prances through a cartoonish setting spouting a stream of puns, allusions and rhymes satirizing vanity and pretense. "Nature sold me a lie," she begins, "and I've kept the deceit/On my face to remind me: her falsehoods repeat."

The concept of fictive narrative is also at play in three intimate gouaches by Larissa Bates. At first glance, the pieces resemble Persian miniatures. But they are populated by characters that Ms. Bates has created to grapple with her heritage as the daughter of an American father and a Costa Rican mother who died when she was a child. "They are fictionalized versions of my identity," she said.

Ms. Bates's paintings are rife with subtexts, from the socio-economic disparities fed by colonialism to the artist's personal metaphors. There are wrestlers who reflect the masculinity she witnessed in her father ("a huge jock," she said), and the little round-faced girls she calls "Chiquita Banana Girls," who, she said, "represent my longing to connect to my mother and to understand Latina culture."

As for the "Not Really" part of the show's title, Ms. Canning said: "People say it all the time to express disbelief, but what does it really mean? People don't question their everyday experience of manipulated reality. Artifice is everywhere, and I would ask this: Why? What does it say about our values and our cultural priorities? What does it reflect about our lives?"