

Singing Mussels, Swimming Pools, and Airplants: This Is Sculpture

BY SCOTT INDRISEK | JUNE 20, 2014



An installation view of Postmasters Gallery's "This is what sculpture looks like" exhibition. (Courtesy Postmasters Gallery)

If you're wondering what sculpture looks like today, just picture a painting submerged beneath the surface of a tiny swimming pool. Or a two-dimensional image of Yves Tanguy-esque biomorphic oddities rendered using 3-D computer graphics. Or an intricate tank of water filled with mussels hooked up to a series of sensors, their movements fed into a laptop and translated into a strangely hypnotic song. Clearly, the title of the current sculpture survey at Postmasters in New York — "This is what sculpture looks like," on view through August 2 — is a bit of a coy misnomer. Certainly there is no single unifying signature, tactic, or concern that is motivating all 16 of the artists included here. All 16, incidentally, are women, though this fact is not overtly stressed: "It's a rather obvious point in relation to the medium and cliched gender bias that exists in 'big sculpture' territory," said Postmasters owner Magda Sawon via email. (Sawon co-curated the show with the gallery's Paulina Bebecka and Tamas Banovich.)

Joanna Malinowska's "Genre Scene With a Fountain" is a lumpy pile of vinyl-and-foam sacks, vaguely mammalian corpses with plaster tusks — they reminded me of sadder, deader versions of Carsten Höller's happy floor animals. Next to them, a monitor plays a short film in which the artist enacts a version of Bruce Nauman's "Self-Portrait as a Fountain." Nearby is Diana Cooper's excellent, unnerving "Cubicle," a roughly workspace-sized enclosure, bordered by stretches of the type of spiky protective fencing used to ward off birds. The mostly abstract sculpture pairs astroturf with perforated metal screens and appropriated images of deck chairs, a clear sky, and the placid surface of a swimming pool. It looks like both a defensive structure (to keep someone out) and a prison cell (to keep someone in). Within the context of its title, the piece could be a subtle expression of the alienation and utopian aspirations of office life.

Daria Irincheeva's "Evening Composition #017" is a delicate balancing act, an assemblage of wooden poles that supports a series of wispy airplants. (If Camille Henrot's Ikebana works at the New Museum inspire a resurgence of plants-in-sculpture, I'm all for it.) Irincheeva's sculpture resembles a construction site built by someone whose creative impatience forbade logical scaffolding. Behind its barricade is a plank plastered with paint chips and other materials, a slick but decidedly rough rejoinder to Finish Fetish.

In the back gallery, a large piece by Michelle Matson nods toward Tom Friedman's humor and material experimentation: Wood painted to look like blocks of styrofoam board, flat drawings of semi-peeled bananas on its surface and on the floor, waiting for a pratfall. The whole weird structure is dotted by green painted orbs, either warts or apples. The untitled monolith faces off against two painted-wood sculptures by Rachel Beach, "Hull" and "Demi," like elements of a geometric abstraction realized in three dimensions. Other works in the show push the hardest against the definitions of sculpture itself: Caitlin Cherry's "Mute City, Big Blue, Port Town" brings a small swimming pool into the gallery, its submerged bottom a repurposed painting. Bodies of water appear again in Natalie Jeremijenko's "MUSCLEXCHOIR Performing Live!," the aforementioned piece composed of a tank of live mussels hooked up to sensors, generating a song that reverberates through the space.

Overall, "This is what sculpture looks like" expresses a sincere faith in the future of the medium. There is next to nothing here that resembles a so-called "unmonumental" aesthetic, nothing lazy or exhausted, nothing that shrugs its postmodern shoulders and insists that everything's been done before, somehow, somewhere. The show may include a few missteps, but that's just evidence that the 16 artists here are still willing to take risks, to see what newness and strangeness can be squeezed from a very old practice.