

At the Renwick, it's about form

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It's high time the Renwick Gallery admitted it: Functionality is dead. Narrative is in. You won't see anything you can actually use in "Staged Stories: Renwick Craft Invitational 2009," the museum's biennial assessment of contemporary fine craft.



Ceramicist SunKoo Yuh's "Fortune Pig," part of "Staged Stories" at the Renwick Gallery, has a dark edge. (Photos By Gene Young)

Oh, it's far from a survey of the field. There are only four artists here: ceramicists Christyl Boger and SunKoo Yuh, fiber artist Mark Newport and glass artist Mary Van Cline. But the show does track something of a "sea change" in craft art, to use the words of director Elizabeth Broun of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. In a dramatic departure from what Broun calls the traditional "baseline rationale" of crafts (their roots in the useful object), there's nary a vessel you can put fruit in here, a glass you can drink out of or a textile you can wear.

Of course, I could be wrong about that last part.

Newport's art consists largely of costumes. Knitted from acrylic yarn, they're designed for superheroes and cowboys: Batman, the Raw Hide Kid and someone called, with unsubtle humor, Sweaterman, among others. And the artist has, in fact, worn some of them, as evidenced by a three-minute performance video called "Heroic Efforts," in which he sits, costumed, in a rocking chair and knits to the strains of Rossini's William Tell Overture (a.k.a., the "Lone Ranger" theme).

But they also function -- and are displayed -- as sculptures, even more than garments. Or perhaps conceptual art is more like it. Hanging alongside them are our own invisible fantasies and expectations. One piece, called "Every Any No Man," is 10 feet long. Even NBA star Yao Ming couldn't wear it.

Which is precisely the point of that piece and another, called "Bobbleman." Covered in pink decorative pompom-like balls known as bobbles, it tweaks -- hard -- the stereotype of what it means to be a man.

Boger's ceramic figures make a nice counterpoint. Her naked bodies are flawless. More like gods and goddesses than men and women. But the fact that most of them are depicted with inflatable pool toys, instead of tridents and lightning bolts, says something. If being divine is

so great, why are they slumming as people? The punning title of one sculpture, "Weekend State" -- get it, weakened state? -- says it all. Perfection is a burden. It's better to have fun.

Each of the two remaining artists tells stories: Van Cline in theatrical tableaux that she photographs and prints onto sheets of sculptural glass; Yuh in jumbled dioramas of clay figures. But the former's work feels cold and formal; the latter's messier and more interesting. Not because of what they say, but because of what they don't.

One piece by Yuh, "False Start," is relatively easy to read. It features an armored vehicle, a turbaned man and a burqa-wearing figure strapped with explosives. But apart from this apparent critique of Middle East violence, much of Yuh's art seems drawn from the dark, cobwebbed corners of his psyche. Dogs, birds and pigs appear, along with fanged, threatening figures, buildings, cars, naked women. His stories aren't legible, per se, but the emotions underlying them -- fear, wonder, lust -- are.

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