

Diving into highlights of student shows

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"Divers" is an entrancing three-minute animation by Pratt Institute MFA Paris Mavroidis. Though boyish, the piece also is sober and adult. (Irvine Contemporary)

Young art isn't always fresh art. Some novices are still waiting to unlearn ideas they've borrowed from their teachers. In the latest summer shows of student work at Irvine Contemporary and Conner Contemporary Art, there's the standard mix of quite good, fairly bad and already-seen.

Two pieces of this student art, however, seem old beyond their years, even though their subjects scream youth.

At Irvine, which showcases early and mid-career artists, "Divers," by Pratt Institute MFA Paris Mavroidis, is a three-minute animation that could have been snipped from a video game.

A sleek young woman in swimming suit and bathing cap climbs out on a high-diving board -- a mile-high diving board -- then leaps into the clouds. She falls, and falls, and falls, then is joined by other girls exactly like her, also in free fall. They cavort around each other's bodies, like circus tumblers, as the camera itself swoops and floats among them as they plummet through the void.

In full-blown Busby Berkeley mode -- parachute acrobatics but without the parachutes -- the girls reach out to each other to form flowers. Their legs unfold, and we watch the flowers blossom. The blossoms join to become a giant snowflake. The snowflake pulls apart, the ocean rushes up and each girl executes a perfect dive into its depths. They climb out of the ocean and onto spiral staircases that reach into the clouds. Credits briefly roll and the girls begin their dive again, looping ad infinitum.

There's plenty that seems boyish about this: the medium, the crowds of perfect girly-girls, the pleasure taken in some wow-cool digital effects. But there's also something sober and adult. The exulting in that female flesh seems only a pretense. It gets lost in a growing sense of dread, as we watch young women become soldiers doing a relentless drill. Girls don't find freedom in Mavroidis's heavens, merely regimentation. Humans become machine parts. These gorgeous skies yield a mechanical sublime. The simplified forms, slick surfaces and stereotyped movements of pre-Pixar animation seem the perfect medium -- suggesting not a kid's enthrallment with technology, but an adult bearing witness to its flaws.

At the other end of town, at Conner, we get something close to a real-life equivalent of Mavroidis's vision. Kyle Ford, a young photographer with a master of fine arts from the Savannah College of Art and Design, shows how we actually build a mechanized sublime for our own kids. In a 40-by-60-inch color photo, Ford depicts the Expedition Everest ride at

Disney's Animal Kingdom in Florida. That ride reproduces, at 1/145th real size, the towering, mystical mountains of Tibet.

Ford's photo shows them picture-postcard perfect, towering into blue skies and reflecting in a limpid lake at their feet. The photo is uncannily sharp, as though a Zenlike focus on the real has been achieved. But that sharpness also reveals the unreality in what we're seeing. Take a second look, and you realize the mountain's twin peaks are joined by scaffolds holding roller-coaster cars. A train-trestle bridge crosses the water at the mountain's base, but it's too small to impress: It makes the humans on it seem the height of rail cars. Specks of color dot the landscape -- not alpine flowers, but the bright caps and T-shirts of Disneyfied guests.

The preternatural clarity of the photo, rather than giving us a neutral window onto the world it shows, seems to speak of the technology that made it. Ford uses technical cameras that shoot 4-by-5- or 8-by-10-inch film, whose images are stitched together and perfected in the digital domain -- and our eyes can somehow sense the artifice involved.

Disney's imagineers can't erect mile-high towers for young girls to jump from; only its animators can do that. But they'd surely build the real things if they could.

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