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‘Measure’ a Measured Success

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“A theoretical physicist,” is one way Lisa Randall likes to describe herself. Randall, a Frank B. Baird, Jr., Professor of Science at Harvard University, teamed up with artist and Chapman University Assistant Professor of Fine Art Lia Halloran to curate a Los Angeles-based contemporary art exhibit. Yet this is by no means Randall’s first foray into the art world. Having already published another book, “Knocking on Heaven’s Door,” and written the libretto for opera “Hypermusic: A Projective Opera in Seven Planes,” Randall has been making inroads with the art community for years now. With the collaboration of these distinguished curators—a scientist and an artist—“Measure for Measure” promises to be an innovative and eccentric collection. The exhibit will run until December 22 in the Carpenter Center.

Nonetheless, anyone walking into the exhibit “Measure for Measure” expecting to find a cohesive, scientific message in art should prepare to be disappointed. “Measure for Measure” is not the elegant fusion of science and art that the combination of the curators’ celebrated intellectual and artistic forces might suggest. The exhibit, a multimedia synthesis of several Los Angeles artists, is instead a series of individual explorations and interpretations bound loosely together by the oddly abstract concept of scale—how things are understood differently from different perspectives. While the exhibit is less cohesive and scientific than could be expected, the diverse artists assembled by Randall and Halloran do not disappoint. Their potent and differing perceptions of scale engage the visitor through equally varied media.

Though an essential concept of Randall’s field, the rather vague theme of scale is inclusive of far more than theoretical physics. Because the concept is so inclusive, the exhibit is loosely correlated and lacks a central message. However, this opens up the possibility for the artists to perform very different explorations through diverse media that still relate well to this abstract theme.

The first work one sees upon walking through the doors is Katrina McElroy’s “Migratory Flow.” This piece is composed of 852 modified video stills printed on vinyl in the shape of small circles and directly adhered to the wall. From a distance, the pattern gives the impression of a flattened helix and employs very organic colors, giving the impression of life. As one approaches, though, it becomes apparent that each is a video still depicting a different version of the same event or scene. McElroy’s work embodies the concept of scale by creating many different interpretations of the same artistic piece when viewed from different distances. Given this relatively basic, uncomplicated embodiment of the concept, McElroy’s piece is appropriately positioned—right at the front of the exhibit. The curators thus confront visitors early with one of the most apparent forms of the theme so as to ease into more obscure constructions.

As one ventures further into the relatively open space of the exhibit, the concept of scale becomes more complicated while the media vary widely from acrylic paint to hung Plexiglas. Susan Sironi’s “A Portrait in Four Parts” presents scale by playing directly with the construction of a larger scale through smaller ones. Displayed are four opened books that have had the pages cut into and drawn upon so as to create three-dimensional scenes from the two-dimensional paper. With this, she presents more than new interpretations

between smaller and larger scales. She also uses these isolated, essentially two-dimensional pages to help construct an entirely new third-dimension. This advances a new perspective on viewing the world by both offering different interpretations of what already is present and creating new ideas that did not exist before. While this shares elements with McElroy's interpretation of divining more of what is there, Sironi qualifies her concept slightly to include the construction of the new dimension and a new idea.

The work that best embodies the contrast of ideas under the broad umbrella of scale is Elizabeth Tobias' performance and installation piece, "Let Them Eat Cupcakes." Appropriately set aside from some of the other pieces, her work involves a large, eerie tent filled with images of sprinkles and large index cards hung from Chinese lanterns. Instead of looking at scale as a matter of contrasting significance at several physical sizes, she looks at it in terms of hunger in Los Angeles. The exhibit poignantly emphasizes the extravagance of cupcakes when there is hunger at large. Tobias deftly and subtly incorporates scale by pointing to the preoccupation with self over society that leads to such individual extravagance. During the exhibit, she hands out free cupcakes for exhibit visitors to eat while reading crowdsourced quotes on the index cards about hunger. Her work is also dynamic as she asks visitors to write a new reflection on an index card, continuing the method of crowdsourcing and expanding her work. Taken together, the performance and installation work illuminate the horrors of hunger in America's second wealthiest city.

The curators' selection of the distinctive works that make up the exhibit is one of "Measure for Measure's" strengths. The exhibit sacrifices a strong, central, over-arching message to tie the work together or any strong relation to science— aspects generally unexpected from curators Randall and Halloran. However, the abstract theme of scale allows for many different artistic interpretations. This, along with use of various media fosters a higher level of engagement and contemplation of the exhibit as a whole. Without placing heavy emphasis on entirely scientific ideas, Randall and Halloran engage fully with the art. Their most significant contribution to the exhibit is their ability to draw some of the most innovative contemporary artists in Los Angeles.