

sculpture

May 2007
Vol. 26 No. 4

International Sculpture Center
www.sculpture.org

NEW YORK

Roberley Bell

Black and White Gallery

Roberley Bell's outdoor installation *At Play* comments on how we play at directing nature to our own ends and how we only recognize and enjoy nature when it is both artificial and confined. The multi-part work features five freestanding sculptures, called "Flower Blobs," and three wall pieces. The Flower Blobs consist of amoeba-like shapes covered with bright, acid-hued plastic flow-

ers, fruits, and birds. Four are mounted on painted plastic poles sunk in pedestals covered with Astroturf, fake flowers, and birds. One dumbbell-shaped form, larger and taller than the others, rests in a round, plastic inner tube. The upright form is topped by a pink plastic log that may have originally ornamented a fish tank and crowned by a pink bird carrying a banana, apple, and pear on its head, like the Carmen Miranda of the avian set. The plastic flowers on each form

cluster close together and overlap, reminding me of the paper flowers used to decorate parade floats. Patterns of color and shape emerge from the appliqué decorations, forming continents and dots across the globe-like shapes of the blobs. The plastic chartreuse and blue wall pieces have a kind of Pop, abstracted daisy shape: five petals surrounding a silver gazing ball. Slightly puffy-looking, they resemble gigantic old-fashioned hot-and-cold taps.

Bell says of *At Play*, "In these intimately scaled sculptures, the dialogue between the real and the artificial extends to the surface covered in plastic flowers and novelty birds. The Flower Blobs become a miniature version, if not a souvenir, of the extreme control of the landscape." Even with such serious intent, these remain appealing objects that draw on contemporary offhandedness, without feeling poorly made. Their colorful whimsy is refreshing, although continual exposure to the weather will fade and erode the plastic, seriously damaging their charm. Bell has excellent mark-making abilities, and her pieces reveal a sense of scale in the placement of decorative flowers and birds. The little birds nestle among the flowers, while the larger ones sit on top of the blobs themselves, so that each piece comes into calm focus, despite the shrieking coloration. Shape and proportion are also carefully considered: the amoeba shapes are not lumpy or ungainly, and they balance so firmly on their poles that they could almost be ridden, like bizarre carousel animals.

Bell says that this work is meant to be "both a play on and with nature." The bee working futilely among the plastic flowers on the day I visited was certainly being played with. But in general the work is too toy-like to uphold Bell's claim that she is "uniting the natural at the interface of the manmade."

—Jan Riley



Above and detail: Roberley Bell, *At Play*, 2006. Mixed media, installation view.