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Consumer Vultures

A multimedia show by emerging artists at Rosenwald-Wolf takes a hard look at the overabundance of American culture.

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"Creative Consumption" at Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery looks at consumer culture through a postmodern lens and shows a pretty world that's all mirage.

The large group show (with works by 19 emerging artists from the cutting-edge West Collection in Oaks, Pa.) has all the hallmarks of ebullience--confectionary colors, humor and plenty of sass. But underneath the bright surfaces of the photographs, paintings and sculptures, there's an austerity and a joylessness that's palpable.

If Warhol took consumer items like Brillo boxes and Campbell's Soup cans and turned them into icons, these young artists are making anti-icons. They're not in love with the culture like Warhol was, but they're obsessed by what they see. And they're serving it up with their own ambiguous responses.

Of course, there's an emphasis on food here. Food has always worked in the service of art, from still-life paintings to the cakes and pies of Bay Area painter Wayne Thiebaud. But here, food represents a kind of icky overabundance of empty calories--and in a number of works it also refers to contemporary art movements like minimalism.

For example, Sharon Core's photo setup Pie Counter is an homage to Thiebaud, with rows of pies and cake right out of one of the master's paintings. But the work has an asceticism and an obsessive feel that evokes both minimalism and a dead end. It's lemmings (or in this case, lemon pies) going off a cliff.

Other food-ennui pieces include Jonathan Seliger's Grand Griddle (Endless Takeout)--an oversized column of Chinese takeout boxes that riffs on Brancusi's Endless Column--and Bill Walker's Snack Cakes, a photo-realist painting of Twinkies and Ho Hos arranged like specimens on a page from a natural history textbook.

The opposite of ennui is appetite, and Jonathan Callan's *Wonderland*--a sculptural array of 18 altered stuffed animals--seems all about it. The piece, which traps soft toys like Eeyore and Furby in thick white goop that looks like cake icing, seems to conflate childhood toy-lust with adult child-lust and any-age food lust. These little objects are about engorgement to the point of disfigurement. They're sly pieces whose message is that excess equals violence.

Undercurrents of violence appear elsewhere, notably in the haunting and beautiful photograph *Emerson* by Vik Muniz. Muniz, a Brazilian-born New York artist whose work is collected extensively by West, places what looks like a white chalk drawing of a boy on top of a street encrusted with confetti and cigarette butts--the aftermath of a party. The boy is a ghost or a galaxy, and the colored litter is cosmic dust. The whole thing feels like an homage to the ephemeral nature of joy.

There are no clunkers in this show, though some of the pieces seem to do more heavy lifting than others. In addition to Muniz, the other heavy lifter is Danica Phelps, whose obsessive record-keeping about her cash flow takes consumption to the level of self-ingestion. Her documentary-like chart *Brooklyn* (Barry McGee), chronicles the red ink (outlays) and green ink (income) from one week in 1999. Phelps' charting her life down to the penny--self-involvement with a funny, weird edge--feels like authentic navel-gazing, unlike the self-absorbed fictionalizing you might get on some reality TV shows.

Phelps' work implies a level of control over life that other works in the show deny. It may be a false hope, but it's one to hang onto. You can control your own consumption--or at least keep track of it.

"Creative Consumption," through May 16. Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery, University of the Arts, 320 S. Broad St. 215.717.6480. www.uarts.edu