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Allison Schulnik

ZieherSmith Inc.



ALLISON SCHULNIK, *YOGURT EATER*, 2011. SCHULNIK: COURTESY OF ZIEHERSMITH INC. NEW YORK.

WHILE SEVERAL PAINTERS ARE CURRENTLY WORKING WITH WHAT could be described as a Chicago-style deep-dish pizza pie palette, few pull it off as undeniably well as California-based Allison Schulnik. Perhaps that's because she was trained as an animator, so her thick impastoed surfaces come across less as a style and more as authentic exploration—a direct offshoot of her work with claymation. With "Mound," her first solo exhibition at ZieherSmith, a melancholic atmosphere is present overall, including the large projection of her sixth animated video, which shares the title of the exhibition. American expatriate singer-songwriter Scott Walker, whose first four solo albums charted in the United Kingdom, loaned his 1969 song *It's Raining Today* to the video. The song's mood is a perfect match for the morphing claymation cast of wandering, pensive figures. While no exact narrative is apparent, one central figure is a sad sack mound of white clay with colored accents, circled by admirers in an adoring orgy. A spider web acts as a curtain opening onto the closing sequence of wispy-haired female dancers, finishing with the backs of their dresses bleeding into faces of rainbow colors.

Also on view are glazed porcelain ceramics on found bases, a gouache on paper work and 10 oil paintings ranging in size from the diminutive *Cat Head* to the massive *Flower Mound* (all works 2011), which dominates the main room of the gallery. Made up of thick layers of paint, the luscious colors of the petals create a visual pop on top of their placement on a dark, mostly black and green background. Sprouting from the middle of the bunch is a clownish figure, whose presence isn't essential, as the flowers themselves hold more than enough visual interest. Another standout work is the large *Idyllwild*, also a dark canvas, which counters the mostly pale and colorful forms of the video. In it a weary figure holds an umbrella and a cane, while the right side of his body is made up of massive slathers of paint resembling an animal carcass. Existing somewhere between the tenor of these two canvasses is *Yogurt Eater*, depicting another dark figure sitting on a nebulous object surrounded by a light background. The hunchbacked brute is caught in a moment of tenderness, reflecting on something we are not privy to, while the revealing title seems to be Schulnik's warning not to judge people on appearances alone.

In contrast, the light colored backgrounds of the still lifes *Red Flower and Oval Flowers* match the tone of the video and are the most straightforward depictions of nature. Updating painter Wayne Thiebaud's method of weighty pigment combined with saturated colors, Schulnik slathers, trowels and builds up the surface with unusual dimensionality, creating a sculptural presence. While her glazed porcelain ceramics, such as the cat in *Standing Gin #3*, remain isolated figures, one can almost imagine an installation in the future consisting of large life-size scenes, similar to the sets for the trippy late '60s children's series *H.R. Pufnstuf*. Since Schulnik seems highly ambitious, I wouldn't put something of that scale past her.

- Chris Bors

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