

Allison Schulnik's Laguna Babylon

The L.A. artist's creepy videos and art stand in beautifully ugly contrast to the Laguna Art Museum's other show

By DAVE BARTON Thursday, Apr 11 2013



While my colleague wholeheartedly embraced the George Hurrell movie-star portraits in the modest upstairs gallery of Laguna Art Museum (see Stacy Davies' "Hooray for Hurrell!" March 15), it's **Allison Schulnik's** one-woman show, tucked away in the dark recesses of the museum's basement, that really deserves the huzzahs. Curated as part of Grace Kook-Anderson's bravura series of ex pose shows devoted to profiling up-and-coming and mid-career artists, the exhibition features the Los Angeles-based animator and abstract impressionist painter's canvases and sculptures, as well as her gently weird stop-motion films. A fitting rejoinder to Hurrell's sepia-toned Hollywood horseshit, Schulnik also dabbles in the realm of film fantasy (the subject of 2012's Scare-Bo series is based on Ray Bolger's scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*), but she also embraces the world's imperfections with a wide-eyed, naive hope, firmly refusing Hurrell's whitewashed escapism.

For instance, the lilting "Ready, Able" by Grizzly Bear, playing softly in the dark womb of the anterior screening room, seems the perfect soundtrack as the elevator doors open onto the gallery downstairs. The music video, called *Forest* and directed by Schulnik, has nothing to do with the song—not that many indie music videos ever really do—but take a seat and watch it in its entirety. Unless you've ingested LSD at some point during your life, you're unlikely to have any clue about what you've just seen. A humanoid cross between Gandalf and a wall-eyed, albino Bigfoot stares at its twin on the other side of a river forest. One liquescens and flows into the water, polluting it, while the other smiles. Naked claymationimps squirm in the blobby, white hand of the remaining figure, until they're fed to a lizard/dragon that melts and shape-shifts during some sort of psychedelic experience. After Gandalf is sucked up into a plastic cube/spaceship, the remaining minutes of the video are cuts to more creatures, a host of disembodied heads straight out of *The Haunted Mansion*, and moreimps.

WTF doesn't even begin to describe it. There's more of the same in the artist's other two films: 2011's childlike, but completely disconcerting, *Mound*, where dozens of ethereal clay figures blossom and die and bleed into each other in an indistinguishable mass of eyes, erections and gaping mouths intercut with skeletal, string-haired dancers performing Pina Bausch choreography. 2008's *Hobo Clown*, also featuring hypnotic music by Grizzly Bear, is less inscrutable and seems more straightforwardly linear: a sympathetic portrayal of mental illness, as a homeless clown in a dark alleyway morphs into a luminous white-faced clown, surrounded by colorful (albeit, eventually predatory) flowers.

Psychosis, melting faces and nature as oppressive force also inform Schulnik's paintings and sculptures in the next room. So new you can smell the oil paint, the pictures feature subjects surrounded by hostile landscapes, thick globs of paint on the canvases giving the work a prickly, grasping, gooey living quality. In the Cemetery Boo series, a Walt Whitman figure (modeled by Schulnik's partner) doodles in the dirt with a stick in a graveyard, surrounded by gray tombstones and emaciated trees stripped of leaves, or sits glaring at us as nature creeps in at both sides to surround him and his feline companion (in Cemetery Boo #2). In a recorded interview accompanying the show, Schulnik says she considers the title subject in her painting Boneless Horse a hero in the vein of Eeyore or The Velveteen Rabbit. Isolated by a dense black background, the desiccated flesh, yellow teeth, lolling tongue and black pits for eyes elicit sympathy for the poor beast, but it isn't "heroic" that comes to mind. "Glue factory" seems more appropriate. Likewise, the patchwork face of the Bolger character in Big Scare-Bo Head isn't comforting or warm: the bone structure of the face is constantly shifting, corruptible, the skin full of boils and pustules ready to burst open and spray the viewer.

Even Schulnik's still lifes celebrate the tainted: Flowers are often used as sexual metaphors, but in the vibrant red, spread-eagled female nude on the vase holding October Flowers sexual isn't immune to decay: the buds and florets are tinged with black. In Gourds and Flowers, blossoms wilt and droop, the pumpkins looking like your fingers would easily punch through their thin, rotting veneers if you even thought about picking them up.

While much of the work on display is a tad repetitive, and the show would've benefitted from the inclusion of some of the artist's earlier, scarier work, what we do see is clearly not going to be to everyone's taste, and I say bravi to Kook-Anderson and Laguna Art Museum for giving such decidedly original, visionary work a shot. I'll happily take Schulnik's shout-out to the depressing inevitability of time and nature catching up with us, and her embrace of the underdog over the airbrushed tomfoolery of Hurrell's Hollywood.

Source: <http://www.ocweekly.com/2013-04-11/culture/allison-schulnik-laguna-art-museum-ex-pose/>