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portia munson at yoshii gallery

by Paul H-O

This show helps confirm something I've been saying since January: that New York's uptown scene is off the drip feed and even jumping spryly after an attempted art triple-bypass (SoHo, Chelsea & Brooklyn). The Yoshii Gallery is part of the new blood on the street and Portia Munson's installation "The Garden" provides more juice to Spring than even Spring itself.

Munson's installation at Yoshii is a logical progression from her sculptural phantasmagoria that caught the art-

world's interest at the New Museum's "Bad Girls" show last year. In that exhibition she presented a 20-foot-long tableau of everything pink-and-cosmetic aimed at the Barbie Doll syndrome school of beauty. It was the visual equivalent of a landscape that leaves a burning sensation in your mind. It was simply hot.

Her new work carries her visual theory of feminine mythology to pathological lengths. I would call it maximum muumuu madness. There is no moment of transition more jarring than that first step into the gallery garden hundreds of flower-print dresses sewn together that cover every square foot of wall and ceiling. Tent-like, close, it's a bedroom boudoir for the Arabian Nights in Waikiki. And that's just the beginning. Thousands of stuffed animals (mostly bunnies) and artificial flowers in a variety of sculptural permutations vie for attention along with

paintings and feminine gewgaws on every surface. The floor is carpeted with throw-rugs made toy-bunny pelts (made from the flattened carcasses of disemboweled bunny dolls). The effect: Laura Ashley on LSD, total manic-femininity implosion with Victorian mood-lighting.

The installation is throbbing with fertility symbols galore. The libido, like mine for instance, became contorted like a pretzel, or so I imagined, because this is one potent garden. This carefully constructed bonzai ikebana is in fact overabundant and consuming to the point of claustrophobia. Its bed is completely swallowed by bunnies, the vanities overflow with femininities, and yes, Rebecca, the dark edge of this scene is consumption, sexual obsession and social distortion plus!

Hello Scarlet, meet Flannery O'Connor.

Munson's dream is reminiscent of Mike Kelley's stuffed animal sculptures and Jeff Koons's kitsch objects, but the association to trash-culture is too easy to get stuck on. Munson's is a more intimate relationship with a street esthetic created by abundant material wealth juxtaposed with poverty and abundant mental illness. Her show includes a glass case filled with squashed bunnies--flat, rectangular, abstract and patterned, a frenzied composition. There are paintings but they get swallowed in the miasma. There's also a video of flowers in various stages of orgiastic abandon but even television gets buried with everything else. It's a new art genre, Maximalism. The only tilt in this game is the stuffed animal gambit and its overpopulation in contemporary art. Not a big problem because after this show there won't be any stuffed animals left.

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