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Otherworldly goods

An ethereal display at Branch Gallery

BY AMY WHITE

Floating Worlds: Kyung Jeon, Taiyo Kimura, kozyndan, Andre Yi
Branch Gallery
401c Foster St., Durham
918-1116, www.branchgallery.com
Through July 28

A young man puts his pet cat's head into his mouth. Happy cartoon children engage in acts of terror. A partially destroyed bridge against a blank color field somehow resolves itself as a landscape painting. A man, naked from the waist down, has a baby strapped to his back suggesting a kind of domestic bondage. These intriguing images can be found in a show called *Floating Worlds* at Branch Gallery.

The show, which features the work of Kyung Jeon, Taiyo Kimura, kozyndan and Andre Yi, is named for the 19th-century Japanese notion of the "floating world," an art movement from which imagery of the urban experience becomes subject matter for works of art. This concise exhibit explores a multiplicity of aesthetic approaches to questions of contemporary Asian identity seen through the lens of an expanding global culture.

The work in *Floating Worlds* goes beyond depiction in its range of cultural and urban referencing. The media used by the artists reflect current and historical forms (from YouTube to Hello Kitty to Hiroshige), often more than one within a single hybridized work. In *Floating Worlds*, Branch Gallery has posited the gallery space as its own floating world, one in which artists hover and convey indelible and potent works of art, souvenirs brought back from multiple worlds, real and imagined.

TAIYO KIMURA

Kimura's DVD "Typical Japanese English" (2005) is a riveting series of vignettes intercut with found footage of a televised match of the Japanese game of Go. The poignant images (such as the above-referenced cat-in-mouth) include food being tossed into a washing machine (and set to "wash cycle"); the artist's mouth in close-up in the guise of a slot machine spitting out a jackpot's worth of quarters (and spittle); and perhaps the most salient of the images, another close-up on Kimura's mouth, now stuffed with a raw fish. The fish's mouth becomes the artist's mouth, a surrogate of sorts. Kimura attempts multiple oral acts through the fish prosthetic: drinking through a straw, brushing teeth, smoking a cigar. This sequence alone can be parsed for a variety of meanings, but certainly the image of a foreign object (fish) placed in a mouth (replacing the mouth) is a direct metaphor for a reconfigured orality, the uncomfortable attempt to exchange one's mother tongue for another.

Also on view are two slick fashion magazines—one features a male figure, one female: "Feel Your Gravity C" (2006) and "Feel Your Gravity B" (2006). The magazines have been excavated by the artist to reveal jewel-like cutouts of eyes that stare back at the viewer. Nearby, "+ - people" (2005) is a vitrine containing 15 tiny fabricated "people" with black square magnet heads. Their fleshy stick-bodies variously sport either swimming trunks (male) or bikinis (female). The polarizing charge of the magnetized figures necessitates that they be placed in the vitrine space with a specific amount of distance between them, otherwise they will repel or stick. Both of these works function as elegant conceptual engines that generate seemingly endless questions about gender, media, individuality and perception.

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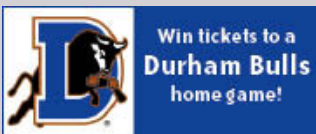


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ANDRE YI

From a distance, Yi's compositions read as clean minimalist abstractions. Close-up they shift into landscapes shaped by key images that activate the picture plane. "Nevadaville (Gallows Frame)" (2006) and "Nevadaville (Bridge)" (2006) feature refined renderings of architectural elements against a single-color background: gallows against pale green, bridge against grey. "Gallows" features a single cluster of pines to establish depth; "Bridge" is anchored by a few additional structural elements of the bridge itself. The surface simplicity of these compositions foments mystery; what drove the artist to focus on these particular antiquated and obsolete structures? Another way to see these works is to court the possibility that the bridge and gallows serve to harness or energize the negative space, that perhaps emptiness itself is the true subject of these compositions.

"Feel Your Gravity B" (2006) by Taiyo Kimura. *Cut magazine*, 12 in. x 9 in. x .75 in.

Photo courtesy of Branch Gallery

KYUNG JEON

Jeon's large-scale canvases trick the viewer into an expectation of cuteness. The shock comes when one begins to realize the cherubic children in her complex tableaux are engaged in acts of mayhem. In "Her Abandonment" (2006), I counted at least 10 separate acts of brutality and torture, including mutilation, sexual abuse and a broad array of sadistic scenarios. What may be even more shocking, however, is how Jeon manages to minimize or filter the impact of the content of these images. It is disconcerting that despite the horrific acts depicted, the canvases continue to retain their cheerfulness. Jeon seems to be reaching for just that disconnect, which is achieved in each of her three pieces. "Tidal Wave" (2007) serves up a happy floral ocean on which a multitude of children are drowning, most wearing facial expressions of woe. One child, however, displays a satanic grin (the artist, perhaps?). "Red Death Fairies" (2006) shows a single child-god battling a maelstrom of scary red angels. The imagery has a mythological quality to it, either from traditional folk tales or Jeon's own psyche. While references include Japanese manga and traditional scroll painting, the fantasy girl-crusaders of outsider artist Henry Darger also seem to be relevant here, in Jeon's interweaving and exorcising her mix of darkest true-life horrors, personal fantasy and girl power idealism.

KOZYNDAN

Kozyndan is the constructed name of Kozue and Dan Kitchens, a married couple who create work collaboratively. As in work by other artist teams such as Gilbert & George or Liz 'n' Val, single works created by more than one artist sustain attendant complexities and raise questions about process, vision and authorship. Kozyndan explores the traditional world of the ama (Japanese pearl divers) as a way to negotiate broader questions of gender and power in the three gouache and graphite pieces on view. The first, "Nirai Kanai" (2007), is painted entirely in indigo tones and offers the image of an epic goddess figure arising from the depths of the ocean; a worshipful ama diver witnesses from below. The piece conveys a sense of awe and mystery without self-consciousness or irony. Another work, "Okaa-san" (2007), brings us two bare-breasted women, rendered with classical skill, each tearing at the other's hair in a fierce fight that seems to glorify and celebrate its own violence. The imagery is suggestive of ancient Greek decorative illustration, sumo wrestling or a scene from *Fight Club*. These two works sandwich the middle piece, "Konoyaro Bukkorosuzo!" (2007), which features the previously described half-naked man with a baby. The raw, superhero quality of the powerful females in the other pieces underscores the contrasting passivity of the male in this world. He looks out at us with a Mona Lisa smile, seeming to enjoy his domesticity and subservience to the goddesses that populate the kozyndan universe.

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