

PERSPECTIVES

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Sculptors open with surreal, scientific angles

By Christine Temin, Globe Staff | September 1, 2004

The Longhorn heifer stands in the middle of the bedroom.

This is the stunning opening to Kitty Wales's installation "Broken Sleep," which -- along with Michelle Lougee's installation "Pomus Ingenium" -- marks the inauguration of the Boston Sculptors' new digs in the South End.

The collective spent a decade in the Second Church in West Newton. As the Boston Sculptors at Chapel Gallery, they occupied a lyrical, idiosyncratic space with vaulting that looks like an overturned ship.

In 2002, the group suffered a shipwreck of sorts, in the form of a break with the church that cost it its lease. So the Boston Sculptors have at last moved to Boston, where, instead of a gallery tucked away in a New World version of Salisbury Cathedral, they have a big street presence in the South End neighborhood that is home to several other serious galleries, as well as the restaurants, interior design studios, and pedicure parlors that come with gentrification.

Their lease on the 2,400-square-foot space -- actually larger than the Chapel Gallery -- is just two years. It's a make-or-break situation, and perhaps that pressure is why the first two solo shows are so good.

The newly renovated industrial space boasts brightly polished wooden floors, a portable white wall to tailor the space to the needs of the sculptors of the month, exposed beams and bricks. Wales occupies the front gallery; Lougee is in back. Both artists had plenty of room to spread out, and both took advantage of it.

Wales is best known for her large animals constructed of battered metal cutlery or appliance parts, which gives them a whimsical air. Her trademark sharks are at several area museums. An example of this body of work, the 1994 "Bearded Vulture," acts as a tease in the big Harrison Avenue windows. Made of a banquet's worth of silverware, it's consummately clever.

With "Broken Sleep," Wales blazes into new, complex psychological territory. Its surreal ensemble of components suggests a narrative: It would be a great set for a play written to fit it. All the objects in the bedroom are made of sheets of matte steel and steel with diamond-shaped perforations that allow you to see through it. There's a sad-looking, sagging bed and pillow; a nighttable with lamp; a window suspended from a beam, with no wall around it; a chest with its top drawer open to reveal unidentifiable forms that seem to want to escape; a drinking glass; and a single shoe that inevitably suggests the phrase "waiting for the other shoe to drop."

That everything is made of the same materials adds to the dream-like, unreal atmosphere -- and in some cases refutes the notion that "form follows function." The drinking glass of perforated steel could never hold a drink; you can see through the perforated metal window, but the view is clearer if you step to one side and just look through the air.

An outline woven into the top of the mattress suggests a human presence, now gone. On the wall above the bed is another object that, like the ones in the drawer, can't be identified and begs for interpretation. Perhaps it represents the ascending soul of someone deceased. Or perhaps it's an ominous cloud.

The heifer is life-sized, which makes it the largest thing in the room. Its impressive horns twirl sideways. The bemused tilt of its head suggests that it might be wondering what it's doing there as much as you are. Obviously powerful enough to trample a human, it doesn't look interested in doing so. It's already awakened whoever was in that bed.

Wales has created an anatomical tour de force: The animal's bony lumpiness is captured so perfectly that it would look at home in a natural history museum. The heifer is see-through, though, and its innards are a series of metal lines and planes that look like Cubism contained within an anthropomorphic form.

The reference to Cubism -- and to Picasso in particular -- is especially strong in the ink wash, pen, and charcoal drawings Wales is also exhibiting. Their main subject is heifers metamorphosing into angular sculptures on wheels. Wales uses a muscular, jagged, confident black line similar to Picasso's around 1908.

Lougee is one of 13 new members of Boston Sculptors, bringing the total to 28 (there were 18 in Newton). Her work is

easier to classify than Wales's. One of many contemporary artists intrigued with the relationship between science and art, Lougee has created an entire lab in her space. Its allure comes from an almost obsessive attention to detail and devotion to creating a kind of parallel world to accompany and ask questions about "real" science.

"Pomus Ingenium" ("Engineered Fruits") is centered on gourd-like shapes laid out on a trio of long tables, labeled in Latin, and looking ready for examination by a scientist who, like the protagonist in Wales's installation, isn't there. That sense of absence links the two shows and provides a logic for their coexistence.

The tug of war between nature and technology, which so many artists have tackled in work about cloning, is Lougee's focus. Her installation is visually compelling. She draws beautifully, a major plus for an artist interested in the documentary aspects of science. Her images of cell-like circles and amorphous organic forms resemble those of Terry Winters.

One wall is filled with delicate drawings on vellum of the faux fruits. Their ethereal quality pulls you in; then you notice the oddities, including one fruit that's split open to reveal pipes and wheels where you'd expect to find flesh and seeds. It's an image both funny and frightening.

A chart about classification is written on a blackboard. A long counter holds specimens from the natural world and clinical-looking instruments for their dissection. You're invited to open the drawers and cabinets, where you'll encounter more of the makings of experiments. There's a very in-progress feel: A book called "Communication Systems: An Introduction to Signals and Noise in Electrical Communication" is open to a particular page, and there's a pad of paper near it to record the relevant information in the text. The lab coat hanging on a hook nearby reinforces that sense that the scientist has just stepped away momentarily.

The pudgy pods on the tables are the heart of the installation. They have vivid personalities. Some have eyeballs that peer out through their skins. Another is held together with rivets, and another with sutures struggling to close a cut. Some have noses and mouths but would have to borrow eyes from their sighted brethren. The largest of the nose-and-mouth brigade is enthroned on a red velvet pillow.

The hybrid critters are, for the most part, cute and innocuous-looking. But Lougee reminds us that there is danger in messing with Mother Nature. There are several blobs with open mouths revealing sharp teeth, ready to bite. They're trapped in a metal cage, labeled ominously: "Origins are under investigation."

Christine Temin's Perspectives column runs on Wednesdays. ■

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