

## **'Cream: From the Top' at Arts Benicia**

Each spring as she has for the past four years, Kathryn Weller-Renfrow marches off to attend every single Bay Area art school's graduation senior exhibition. Like all of us, she enjoys encountering new work (and has undoubtedly accumulated a lifetime of art karma). But in making the rounds, the Arts Benicia artistic director has another agenda: sleuthing out the ripest plums from the near-MFA's and plucking them for *Cream: From the Top*, her own nonprofit's yearly late-summer show.

*Cream* is fast becoming a Bay Area favorite, and 2005's edition was nearly perfect, anchored this year by several video pieces. Amy Hick's *Suspended Series #1 and #2* employed a simple kaleidoscopic effect to create otherworldly forms that emerged, floated and vanished in weird, hypnotic choreography. (Closer scrutiny proved them views through car windshields from local bridges, but this didn't lessen the magic.) Set to a murmuring audio loop, Hick's piece was delicate, cheerful and, despite its mundane source material, visually spellbinding. Across the room, six shorts by Sean Horchy proved tasty eye-d'oeuvres: One, *Stereonotous*, quickmixed various household glimpses – a bottle opening, a needle dropping on a record, the *clack* of a sprung padlock – into a funky, catchy video track. And Michael Zheng's *sur l'herb*, an accelerated, fixed-camera portrait show through trees of a group of young girls, effectively transformed their mysterious activities into insect-like scrambling, like a mound of human termites.

Cream also featured innovative sculpture, including Scott Oliver's tweaked furniture – *Span*, a pair of adjacent café tables whose laminate tops Oliver had woven together into a gentle hammock, and *After Hours*, which fused four bentwood chairs into a Chinese puzzle – and M. Elisabeth Higgins O'Connor's *Room Full of No Names*, a quintet of huge, gloomy rodents, crudely shaped from blankets, towels, cement, wire and string (and evoking Kathryn Spence's mud animals from years past).

An installation by Ehren Tool proved more conceptual. A veteran of Gulf War I, Tool threw and fired thousands of ceramic cups and displayed them in meticulous rows. As part of the piece, he gave the cups away to viewers, and mailed several to prominent government officials, whose correspondence (or lack thereof) comprised part of the display. The thoughtful installation made real one ex-Marine's wartime ambivalence, balancing militaristic exactitude with deep compassion (or lack thereof) and horror.

Two other artists demonstrated superhuman rigor. For *The Sky at 6 a.m. Every Morning in February, 2005*, Laura Paulini created twenty-eight matrices of acrylic and watercolor dots, which rippled in close-set waves down each sheet. Equal parts painting and meditation, the piece called forth a calm mindfulness that contrasted nicely with much of the rest of the show. Jill Sylvia's obsession, on the other hand, was for holes: The artist cut thousands of rectangles from between lines of ledger paper (a feat as extraordinary as it sounds) and displayed the sheets in grids. The associations were myriad: an evaporated economy; a bankrupt corporation; a financial-district skyscraper, its windows perforated by a bomb or gale.

The rest of Cream's two-dimensional works were more predictable, with some exceptions: Heather Kessinger contributed compelling, moody photographs, Yoon Lee, an explosive, graffiti-inspired acrylic; Jake Longstreth, a superb pair of contemporary landscapes; Lisa Stoneman, an intriguing, multilayered watercolor; Marq Sutherland, a quartet of wry photographs called *The State of Being Manly*. As one might deduce, the show's only drawback was its size: With nineteen artists and multiple works by many, *Cream* proved a rich dollop, and much to absorb in a single visit. But such a complaint is slight, one much of the rest of the country would gladly suffer. Besides good schools nurturing exceptional young artists, the Bay Area is lucky to have a curator like Weller-Renfrow, whose research necessitated countless hours to create such a satisfying show. Even after a couple of our own spent enjoying Cream, we remain in her debt.

-Colin Berry

*Cream: From the Top* closed in August at Arts Benicia, Benicia. Other artists in the show included Carl Auge, Travis Kerkela, Kyong Ae Kim, Lauren Pace, Catherine Saiki and Wei Weng.

Colin Berry is a contributing writer to *Artweek*.

Published on pages 13 & 14 of Artweek's October 2005 issue with two images: M. Elisabeth Higgins O'Connor, *Room Full of No Names, 2005*, mixed media, 6'; Catherine Saiki, *Sutured Bells, 2005*, oil on board, 10" x 10".