



Fredrik Paulson, "Arch Chair"



Jimenez Lai, "Continuous Landscape"

Courtesy photos

Serio-Comic Form 'n' Function

THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART'S RECENT ENDEAVORS INCLUDE EXHIBITIONS IN ITS LONGTIME PASEO NUEVO SPACE, A DEVELOPING PROPERTY IN THE FUNK ZONE AND A MOBILE SIDE PROJECT CURRENTLY BECKONING FROM STEARNS WHARF

By Josef Woodard,
News-Press Correspondent



'Free Play'

When: Now through August 20

Where: Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara, 653 Paseo Nuevo

Hours: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday, Friday and Saturday; 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Thursday; 12 to 5 p.m. Sunday

Information: 966-5373, mcasantabarbara.org

Consider, for the moment, that the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara has been transformed into a designer showroom, a temporary village arranged into modules separated by loosely cordoning-off curtains of fabric. It's something of a Lilliputian mash-up of Pacific Design Center, a Martian Macy's and a high-minded flea market meets a microcosmic design room matrix lined with bedsheets.

In the work itself are notions of interior design, furniture gone at least slightly askew, and assorted sculptures suitable for a post-modern domicile or a contemporary art museum. Add to that a presiding sensibility of playful imagination-flexing and new twists on the old wrestling match of form vs. — and in bed with — function.

Voilà, here we have "Free Play," a shamelessly fun but thoughtfully considered array of work by international artists, architects, designers and those who happily blur lines of self-definition. Curated by noted design expert Alexandra Cunningham Cameron, the invigorating "Free Play" lives up to its title and teases the senses and art-

appreciative mind in some refreshing and sometimes gently bizarre ways. As an ideal "how do you do" introduction to the show, Aaron Young's "Tire Swing" hangs from the ceiling close to the MCASB entrance, a childhood symbol of innocence fashioned from humble cast-off materials, but loaded with the addition of a gold chain and a shiny brand new tire.

Whimsy and play are important factors here, and gently ambient music (with slight tensions folded in) tickle the gallery air, but occasional edgy assertions and informative back stories find their way into the show's conversation, as well. Tucked semi-surreptitiously into one gallery corner, for example, Katie Stout's "Pepita" is a jumbo female nude — as retooled sofa — taking as reference points Goya's "The Nude Maya" as well as the grubbier, creepier model of "plastic Judy doll" sex toy. Art historicism rubs up, sleazily, against modern sexist dross.

Looming eerily over the top of the "curtain line" of fabric walls, we see Rhys Gaetano's "Disco Ball," a huge and misshapen ball caked with mirror shards, suspended from the ceiling and seemingly bloated or swollen

from its original spherical shape (made to resemble a laboratory strawberry gone very wrong) of the head of the Elephant Man. Once again, as with many pieces in the show, a familiar object and the contextual baggage we bring to that object is reconfigured, playfully but also a bit subversively.

Fredrik Paulson, a Swedish designer, gooses the form/function balance by connecting two chairs with his "Arch Chair," goofily connected by a tall, arching chair back. (Coincidentally, his "Siamese twin" style chair resembles surrealist sculptural work done by longtime Santa Barbara-based sculptor Ed Inks).

A very different chair reference is at work (and play) with the "Beach Chair," by the Brooklyn-based Snarkitecture, a design firm founded by Daniel Arsham and Alex Mustonen. A simple tub of smaller translucent plastic balls fill a rectangular container resembling an art crate (but also, with a stretch of the imagination, a casket)

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“Beach Chair” satirizes and invites new definitions of leisure furniture. Relaxation takes on another incarnation in “Sauna,” by the architecture group June 14, in cahoots with Arno Bundhuber, in which the staple Scandinavian tradition is cleverly reduced to a compact square module. Glass-lined, this sauna has its privacy factor compromised, rendered visible to the outside.

Playthings and play stations with characters also naturally figure into “Free Play,” also with ulterior stories attached to the art. An artist with architecture, cartooning, storytelling and theoretical mojo in his experience, Jimenez Lai created an epic installation for the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in 2016, “The Tower of Twelve Stories.” A small fragment from that large work, “Continuous Landscape,” easily fits into this show, with its resemblance to a length of concrete tubing inside of which is staged a dystopian sci-fi world, with tiny gravity-defying plastic figures and objects, in white on white.

Child’s play revisited also appears in Norwegian ceramist Elin Aasheim’s “All You Zombies,” a veritable small village worth of lumpen, “art brut”-ish ceramic creatures, resplendent in sloppy, gloppy paint. While echoes of early childhood creative zeal greet the



Elin Aasheim, “All You Zombies”

eye, the project takes on a deeper meaning when we learn that, after a debilitating head injury, the artist found it hard to create her more typically fine, detailed ceramics.

As a therapeutic plan, she decided to create these creatures in fast, rough gestures, limiting herself to five minutes per piece. Spontaneity rules here. Perfectionism can wait.



June 14 and Arno Bundhuber, “Sauna”

Courtesy photos

“Play,” that critical component of virtually any creative process, comes in many forms and levels of underlying seriousness. In its intriguing ways, “Free Play”

toys with that flexible definition of the p-word, resulting in the transformation of MCASB into an expressive temporary ward of delight.