

Sins of the Flesh

Visual vespers at SAMA

by Elaine Wolff



"Porcini," 2004, sepia-toned silver gelatin print by David Halliday, on view at SAMA.



"Sardines." 2004. by Halliday.

It's an intensely graphic month at the San Antonio Museum of Art, where antique suppurating martyrs are countered by modern meat, splayed, ground, stacked, and photographed for consumption.

I'm a fan of the bacon, but most of the subjects of David Halliday's still-life photographs are actually vegetables, and in both his sepia-toned black-and-white images and more recent full-color prints, his composition moves from Old Master homage to contemporary abstraction, in which zucchini and peppers are reduced to shape and color against two-toned backgrounds. They're stylized and eye-catching, and only occasionally tip into absurdity in some of the transitional compositions, like the almost hilarious "Still Life With Dorian Fruit," which looks like a study for a Muppets musical number. But "Banana (Diptych)" from 1995, fits right in the post-Duchamp sculpture tradition.

Of these, I like the Old Master numbers best, the way Halliday captures the tactile decadence of painting, the time-frozen quality of still life, and the bittersweet holiness of transience with more feeling than many of his fellow contemporary-still-life practitioners. In "Zucca Grande," a gargantuan, pockmarked pumpkin looms over a pebble-like snail and fig, and a tiny bee tests credulity. And in 2007's "Bread House," the composition is classic sci-fi, but parts of the palette are pure Dutch.

Halliday's really weird photos are the best, even if the magic of fetishization — an intense sensory fusion of temptation, indulgence, and rebuke — only works in small doses. He displays singular or simply paired foodstuffs in morally bankrupt beauty inside a claustrophobic lightbox lit from the right through a frosted circle, and produced as sepia-toned silver-gelatin prints. An octopus unfurls like brocaded petticoats waiting to be despoiled. A cut salami rests atop a glistening slab of bacon as if it's won the wrestling match. "Sardines," from 2004, are stacked like



“La Piedad,” an early 18th-century sculpture of carved, gilded, and polychromed wood.

ingots in a silver cup, while “Porcini,” also 2004, balance precariously against the walls, defeated Titans, dazed by battle.

The Arts of the Missions of Northern New Spain: 1600-1821, installed in the museum’s forbiddingly dark special exhibitions space, is claustrophobic and oppressive — beginning as it does with lifesize paintings of wounded and bleeding missionaries, moving quickly into virgins, babes, and viciously mauled Jesuses, circling back to sainted martyrs, and ending with a sort of reification of submission — but also tragically beautiful and occasionally strangely erotic. (I’m thinking of a statue of a kneeling missionary, exposing a patch of his white undergarment over his heart; a short leap to Arthur Dimmesdale, whose torment was tempered in Old World oppression and a brief taste of the libertine New World.)

Often created as religious propaganda, many of the works don’t transcend their initial purpose to become objects of art that you might contemplate coolly for style or relative beauty. But a handful of pieces closer to folk than fine art radiate a personal devotion that’s tender and captivating — especially a small box that contains a radiant Virgen de Guadalupe painted on a shell, a misproportioned Pietà, and an elaborate tabernacle decorated with abalone, a delicately etched mother-of-pearl cross, and 3-D sacred hearts.

Estranged from the European Renaissance, the show’s subjects reek of incense and close medieval quarters. Yet they make a fascinating record of the narrative and power of martyrdom in the colonization of the New World. •