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THE ARTS > VISUAL ARTS

## The mother country



Not Lady Gaga, but "Aaron" by Ben Aqua, courtesy of Blue Star Contemporary Art Center

### Fotoseptiembre's First Friday

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BY JERID REED MORRIS

The annual Fotoseptiembre festival hit First Friday last week and ushered in curator Kimberly Aubuchon's photo show, *This is not a photo show*. Aubuchon has assembled an ensemble of photographers playing dually at Blue Star's Contemporary Arts Center and the Unit B gallery in Southtown.

First of the Blue Star batch, Yumi Janairo Roth's photos of barricades slip-covered or cloaked in disco mirrors are hung overlooking the impressive props themselves, which occupy the center of the gallery room floor. In their respective photos, Roth has set them with a keen eye and framed them with a solid sense of design and arrangement. The red-and-white-striped slip-covered barricade looks lush and clean against its dilapidated New Jersey setting. Likewise, Roth's impertinent disco barrier seemingly impedes Officer Jay from approaching the viewer. We're grateful for this fact, as he doesn't look particularly pleased. On the gallery's opposite wall, Ben Aqua's work is ambiguously attractive in a modern-excess sort of way. He's obviously got a good camera and some expensive lights, and perhaps a Dr. Phibesian sense of the macabre, but the posing of his subjects (what appears to be Lady Gaga with a diamond for a head, a faceless hunter in the woods, etc.) is too perfectly commercial to make his work really interesting of its own merit.

Waste no time entering the cubicle in the corner of the room, allowing yourself to be beset by Michael Noel-Tod's jarring video images of freeze-framing, lamé-clad hipsters set to a most unseemly, clanky soundtrack. Seizure-prone patrons, be warned. A crowd of lazily disinterested First Friday-ers ventured into the exhibit with me, and while they, beers in hand, seemed to distractedly enjoy Noel-Tod's caustic exploration of "eroticism, hedonism, alienation, and fear," I, on the other hand, felt only one of the attendant adjectives seemed to apply. Blank hedonism is the name of the game here, but I wouldn't have disparaged him for having taken a better stab at eroticism.

William Betts has developed an intricate process of drilling holes in mirrors and filling them with acrylic paint, mosaic-style, to reproduce his photos of commercial airliners. While much respect is due for the labor-intensive nature of his endeavor, the end result doesn't really seem to have been worth all the trouble. Betts is attempting to project his own fondness for 747s against their perhaps more sinister reputation in the post-9/11 world. What we're presented with, however, is neither sinister nor especially appealing. Rene Magritte's pipe, to paraphrase his own words, could neither be packed nor smoked by the observer, and was therefore a poor substitute for the real, everyday object. If this is not an airplane, it's a lot of work and too little reward. Rounding out Blue Star's share of the exhibit is Helen Maureen Cooper's photo exploration of shiny fingernails digging in cupcakes and such — a superbly executed exercise in zooming in all super close. But the individual photos are lost amongst each other, each flailing for an individual identity and message but finding none, so far as I could tell.

Over at Unit B, Thomas Cummins and Michael Eddy are roommates in the cottage-turned-gallery space. Cummins has been crammed into the kitchen, and his choice of using the old house as the setting and subject matter for his photographs is a directly beautiful one, a well-placed commentary of his whereabouts and denotation of the exact moment and location of his art. Above the sink hangs a darkly lit photograph of that exact spot — the kitchen sink viewed from the other room, with a blank spot on the wall where the

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photograph now resides as I view it. I don't presume to plumb the depths, if any, he is trying to communicate to me, but I appreciate his canny eye and nod to plain beauty and seemingly nothing more.

His roommate Eddy, meanwhile, has probed an apparently fathomless depth in his digital slideshow of candid photographs accompanied by occasionally mismatched and purposefully out-of-sync voiceover captions. I don't get it, and beyond some perceived allure in boring, ill-framed images of daily happenstances and encounters de rigueur, I don't know that there's much to get. He's got a digital camera and a digital projector, and it strikes me that without their aid he might not be quite capable of creating art. I'm aware of the increasing legitimacy of technology-influenced and -brokered art forms, but this to me feels like nothing more than an overwrought demonstration of the merits and capabilities of the Panasonic PT-P1SDU digital projector and Apple sound-editing software.

Among other interesting openings at Blue Star was Beto Gonzales's fun, colorful exhibit of paintings, *My Forever Is Ending Today*, in the Stella Haus space. Boldly flat, engaging cartoons of floating intestines and donkeys with too many tails pinned on them cry out for analysis. He won't upset the current preponderance of cheeky Latin surrealism exhibited in great quantity at any given First Friday, but he's managed to present it lightly, totally devoid of menacing dystopia. There is no penis stabbing through a gory eyeball pinata to be found here, and this is relieving. Gonzales presents much to consider but he isn't going to bully me into any rashly overwrought interpretations.

However, the real gem of Friday's openings is Kelly O'Connor's *Worn By The Sun* exhibit at Sala Diaz. It's bright, staggeringly grotesque, and immaculately and artfully tailored to the dimensions of the gallery itself — a true installation piece, a hopelessly disposable, freakishly beautiful funhouse. Pink yarn casts circular rays from room to room. Gold paint drips down the walls from the ceiling and onto the wall-spanning paper portrait of a cherub shooting the pink yarn rays from her knuckles. In the next room, Falcor is ridden by Atreyu, *Neverending Story*-style, across the backlit window. Gold-dipped cicadas clamber about on little shelves, and abdicated wasps' nests have had their chambers filled with fluorescent paints to resemble tasty confections. It's equal parts ghoulish Disneyan spectacle and child molester chic, done with flair by a local artist comfortable on the sharp edge of the local envelope. •

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