

BEAUTIFUL DECAY

STILL LIFE TRANSFORMS AT DANFORTH

Danforth Museum of Art curator Jessica Roscio is disrupting the stillness of the popular and bucolic still-life arrangement. While studying the form, she noticed, "variations on the definition" of the genre, the most exciting element being the condition of flux.

Roscio has designed another clever multi-component exhibition with a complicated theme: "Beautiful Decay," a statement show featuring objects from Danforth's permanent collection and three separate yet connected solo installations by invited contemporary artists, each offering a different process and aesthetic: Sarah Meyers Brent, abstracted assemblage and painting using readymade and organic material; Steve Duede, photographs of decomposing flowers and fruit; and David Weinberg, precise and exquisite still-life hyper-realism.

The idea of being in the process of transformation is obvious within "Beautiful Decay," but a more mysterious and seemingly impossible question hovers over the exhibition: why and when is decay, decomposition, messiness and ugliness deemed beautiful?

To answer the question, we must define "beautiful," which is universally subjective. What is steadfast within "beautiful" is the condition of power and the sublime. Roscio explained it this way: "The unsettled aspect of the works on view is what makes them beautiful and difficult to look away from." Moreover, the condition of being "unstill" is attractive because it inherently contains risk, impermanence, hope of resolution, and the possibility of reward and rest.

Capturing the flux of life, the violence within and revealing awe



Sarah Meyers Brent, *Living Paint* (detail).

is what Roscio and her artists are attempting to do. To engage the thesis "still life is anxious motion," Roscio selected works from within the customary style to set the stage, and then pushed open the idea by including alternative views.

Haley Hasler's still life, for example, maintains a direct connection to art history in that it contains the usual formula: an arrangement of objects associated with domesticity and wealth – delicious food, a candelabra and a sneaky white cat investigating a lobster. Hasler's piece, however, is not static. A figure, a woman in a long red dress, pearl necklace and ballet shoes, is in motion: captured at the

point of serving up and commanding a dinner party, she stands knees bent, legs wide open, on top of the table and within the arrangement holding a soup ladle in one hand and tureen cover in another while looking at the viewer.

Other curatorial favorites from the permanent collection explicitly converge beauty and grotesque. The still-life photographs of Tara Sellios, which are within the classic understanding of what a still life is, further induce morbid feelings similar to the effect produced by the vanitas structure. Sellios balances pretty objects with disgusting dead things, a motif that has never lost its power throughout art history.

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OF ART
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To answer the question of why imperfection and messiness is seductive, we look to Meyers Brent. She's a painter by practice using the formula of deconstruction/construction and abstraction to compose alternative forms of landscape. Her work is about the emotional capacity of texture. Imperfection, she said, is beautiful because "it's alive and feels real."

Her solo exhibition is entitled, "Seep, Spill, and Grow." It's her first museum presentation and features a group of sculptural paintings (including "Spewing Plant") and thin, pole-like paint shaving and mixed-media constructions from 2011. There are also wall installations: "Living Paint," an "archway" floral, fabric rag and plastic collage form and a new site-specific wall arrangement.

The wall composition is landscape

in orientation, approximately 17' x 10', and made from a jumbled collage of toxic materials – home insulation foam, plastic gloves, paint and artificial flowers – mixed with organic material and clothing, including discarded baby onesies that once belonged to her children, underwear, socks, and bras.

Displayed together and frozen in foam – some of which has been painted black to appear like earth –spilling out and tumbling downward, these objects act as a type of "still life." It looks as if her private life has been caught by an unexpected natural and chemical disaster. For Meyers Brent, this piece exemplifies her most current practice, being both universal in theme as well as personal, documenting the "unstill" and haphazard, expanding aspects of living.

In concept and structure, the composition arrives directly out of the artist's experience as a woman and mother. "My work [also] alludes to the body and bodily processes," she writes of her creative process. "I like how the organic forms (both natural and artificial) simultaneously reference the body and the growth and decay in the landscape." In two other paintings, "Mommy Loves You 1 & 2," she courageously engages the ambivalent emotive quality of maternal love – it's wild, always in flux, and sublime.

Acknowledging the uncontrollable aspects of life, Meyers Brent attempts to bring order to chaos. The paintings and assemblages all have a solid geometric plan grounding the structure onto which spontaneity is held – or "stilled" – in place.

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