

Capturing the nature of art

Grayduck and Big Medium exhibits' artists look at mankind and the world around us

By Jeanne Claire van Ryzin | Wednesday, August 11, 2012, 12:49 PM



Casey Polacheck's oil paintings at Grayduck Gallery offer a wry and layered parody of the natural world.

In our meta-media conceptually configured age, it's a welcome sight that the natural world still preoccupies artists' imagination, as in current shows at Grayduck Gallery and Big Medium.

"Tamed Territory" at Grayduck gathers a trio of artists — Calder Kamin, Casey Polacheck and Areca Roe — who share a penchant for plumbing humankind's complex and contradictory relationship with animals.

Kamin manipulates the preciousness of shiny porcelain to make figurines that bend (literally) the roles we project onto animals.

Roe shoots moody photographs of zoo animals and their habitats that quietly say plenty about the ironies of the manufactured wildness that we create to ostensibly save wild creatures.

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But it's Polacheck's oil paintings of natural history museum dioramas that offer the most wry and layered parody of our conflicting history with and behavior toward the animal kingdom. After all, what are dioramas but imagined — and idealized — stage settings for wildlife? They purportedly portray realistic scenarios, but are girded by romantic fantasies.

Polacheck calls attention to this subversively, knowing we're not always used to reading museum dioramas so critically.



Why, in one painting, is that polar bear poised with its feet on the

background to its natural habitat?

Polacheck's depictions of dioramas subvert our expectations.

surface water as if it's walking on the surface? And, in another, doesn't that giant chimpanzee have a paintbrush in its hand, ready to complete the idealistic painted vista that stands in as a

In his Big Medium exhibit, Kevin McNamee-Tweed uses rocks as his canvas.

Everything is endearing about Kevin McNamee-Tweed's "Rocks,"

his solo show at Big Medium.

McNamee-Tweed uses rocks as his canvases, painting and drawing in black sumi ink rocks that range from small to platter-sized. And the artist coyly suggests that his cartoonish images (many of which are augmented with text) offer "a comprehensive history of humanity."

Actually, what the rocks offer is McNamee-Tweed's charming, sardonic and often sexually charged musings on the origins of human life rendered in own quirky hieroglyphics. These are the alternative archaeological finds — the evidence of our goofy fallibility.

On one rock McNamee-Tweed catalogs a prehistoric to-do list: "Make rain with sacrifice," "hunt," and "gather" top the roster.

On others, Simpsons-esque characters act out fledgling developments in human knowledge: A man pushes a child riding a bike with square wheels.

And on another, McNamee-Tweed offers the remnant of a drawing depicting what surely must have been a major revelation of early history: "Man walks on sunny side of road."

Ah, human progress.

Contact Jeanne Claire van Ryzin at 445-3699

"Tamed Territory" When: Through Aug. 20

Where: Grayduck Gallery, 608 W. Monroe St.

Cost: Free

Info: www.grayduckgallery.com

"Rocks"

When: Noon to 4 p.m. and 7 to 9 p.m. Friday Where: Big Medium, 5305 Bolm Road

Cost: Free

Info: www.bigmedium.org