Milica Acamovic
Plug Workshop

#Awkward

Two enormous, humanoid figures (nearly 8 feet) collide into each other, their fabric bodies distinct from each other, yet merging. The humanoids resemble handmade toys fashioned out of socks or burlap, unadorned except for the stitches piecing them together, the red-lined gym socks one of them sports, and the bright orange head of the taller figure. The merge is violent, as one figure smashes through the chest of the other, his head popping out through the other side. Yet the energy of the attacker is seeping away, the rest of his body slumped while one scraggly arm touches the floor and supports its falling body. The other arm halfheartedly punches his foe and widely misses, as a long fabric string winds down from its fist end and emphasizes. This aggressive yet failing arm, almost begins to hug the opposing figure, who looks down upon his attacker with his larger, snouted head, providing no further resistance than the imposing weight of his body.

This fabric and polymer-covered steel structure by Eric Conrad is entitled “The Dependent” (2003). We witness two bestial figures in a primordial yet eerily relatable scenario: the figures seem stuck in a paradoxical circle of intense aggression yet severe need. The figures are framed in a moment of conflict, yet their impact is what props both of them up. Their slumping necks and backs convey a broken sadness, but their merging suggests an intimacy, perhaps even a possibility of mutual healing. The first, attacking figure may be attacking the source of his dependency, the object of his frustration, his master, appears the stronger (and more vibrant) of the two as he remains upright, drooping but still standing taller than the falling assailant. They struggle with each other, unsure whether to retain their separateness or unite in their mix of need and angst that concludes in lethargy. “The Dependent” is a vivid metaphor for the complex, contradictory and often exhausting nature of human relationships.

Co-dependency and merging identities is also the theme of Conrad’s other work featured in this exhibit. “No Name 3” (2014) features a smaller scale (14”x16”) and more complex tangle of stuffed animals. The great variety of creatures—horses, rabbits, a humanoid—are fashioned from “found” fabric, adding an origin story of refuse reanimated. However, the actual execution of the stuffed animals falls flat of convincing, lively animation. Most of the draped creatures hang passively, nestled within the others without arrangements that truly look interactive. A mostly non-energetic bundle, “No Name 3” lacks any sense of the “danger of identity loss” that its label suggests, and that is clearly present in its earlier companion work. “The Dependent”, however, conveys its titular promise, with its charged sense of both action and decline, and its far more effective and evocative suggestion of tension.

Mike Erickson: “Here’s Some New Stuff”

The woman’s flesh is a bright, vibrant red that jumps out at us from an otherwise cool night. She puffs her red cheeks as she plays her two flutes in profile, just like the yellow theatre mask perched in her pastel multi-colored hair. Her hair is reminiscent of those 18th century white wigs that the aristocrats, especially the French, were known for—except for its twisted, red, yellow and light blue strands. The yellow mask stares and blows into its parted flutes directly at us, its eye sockets not blank but hosting stark white pupils. The woman’s face is slightly contorted, perhaps from the effort of blowing the pipes, but more likely, it seems, from a slight expression of contempt. From her bowl of foodstuffs we spy an onion, an orange, and a tall, slender pink growth that curves at its top, improbably eye-level with the red lady. Behind it glows a bright moon-like disc, its center containing a tiny yellow flame just above the pink form. In the distance, either a painting or a window shows fleshy forms in an indecipherable act of copulation. Nearly hidden, a pick-axe rests in the woman’s arms.

Mike Erickson’s Painting “Charmer on the Veranda with a Bowl of Foodstuffs, I Hardly Know Her” (2014) offers sensual symbols and hints of conflict, desire and distance. Like a reworked version of a neoclassical Pan, rendered in the feminine, the Charmer is a bold red that screams either passion, danger, or both. Far too human-fleshed to be a snake, the object of her charms is a serpentine phallus. The red woman’s furrowed brow, the repetition of puffed cheeks and mouths closed in effort over long, cylindrical forms, the tautness of her muscular arm and clinging dress, and the entwined nudes in the distance all reinforce the layered theme of sexual acts, particularly fellatio. What is ambiguous is the author’s relationship to the the Charmer; is Erickson presenting himself (“I”) as a voyeur of the veranda? Is the Charmer, shown with her daily bread, a sex worker caught in an act of labor? Does Erickson know (hardly) this sexual, but stern-eyed woman an intimate but anonymous encounter, or from a neighbor’s distance? Whether from pure fantasy or pure memory, Erickson paints a beguiling mystery brimming with desires, secrets, and maybe shame.

Another work by Erickson in this exhibit stands out as far less compelling than his other works. “Someone’s (Not Mine But Kinda Mine) Daydream of Nighttime with a Community Orchestra Violinst (Not 1st Chair But Still Talented)” (2014) has a fantastic title like the artists’ other works, but falls short in comparison to the cosmic weight of his other themes. Interesting objects appear—a portrait, a violin, a leg—in a painterly, surreal arrangement that suggests a glowing, human figure laying in bed. However, this style of painting, with its base like tones reminiscent of the surrounding pictures, simply looks unfinished next to “Charmer on the Veranda” and Erickson’s other pieces.