

Mary Oros and William Harsh at Arts Benicia

The terms "affinity" and "variation" in this exhibition's title, denoting parallelism and mutation respectively,

derive from Darwin's theory of evolution, still a thorny issue in third-millennium America, and not just for fundamentalists. Those who accept evolution tend, optimistically, to see it as a force for good—for progress. Fundamentalists who see it as godless are right (though that's why they reject it). The adaptation of organisms to changing conditions is blind and value-neutral, and progress is not assured. No one is minding the store.

But we prefer illusions about our status hierarchies, both human and divine. In the nineteenth century, "the survival of the fittest" was transposed to socioeconomics by Calvinist/capitalist predators who conceived of employees as herbivore prey (I'm not making this up) in order to justify their ferocity. In the art world, too, the belief in aesthetic progress prevailed until recently: *Homo greenbergii* theoretically became less simian and beetle-browed, and more spiritual, with each succeeding new style.

The two artists in this show, Benicians Mary Oros and William Harsh, reject such social myths. They construct personal imaginative worlds in

the classic Modernist spirit, seeing that form of individualism not as outmoded and impossible, as Postmodernists do, but as an enduring way to investigate the world and to transform subjectivity into universality.

Oros's biomorphic sculptures—of fiberglass, plaster and concrete—suggest hives and nests, or traps or tombs, and embody the conviction expressed in her

artist statement that "primal and intuitive knowing inevitably hold greater meaning than the dictates of society and culture." The five human-sized freestanding constructions on view are both surprising and poetically apt—"external representation" and "essence of being" forged into artistic unity. The hollowed-out black tree-trunk form of *Inside Out* (2008) sits atop a circlet of fingerlike roots; jagged flames rise at the top while mouth-like apertures in the bark suggest fright and alarm. *Blue Beast* (2002), a headless, four-legged animal torso, sprouts spines or tendrils as a sea potato might. *Red Wall of Holes* (2002) is comprised of nine fleshy ovals, like huge pieces of squid tentacle, stacked in threes, suggesting, again, gaping mouths. In *Home* (2004), a head-like oval rests atop three legs amid a quartet of ambulatory trunks that have converged on the object as if to investigate. *Indigo Under Lace* (2008) includes tendrils that seem to weave themselves into a basket or hut, protecting a perforated triangular central form. Oros's imagery may

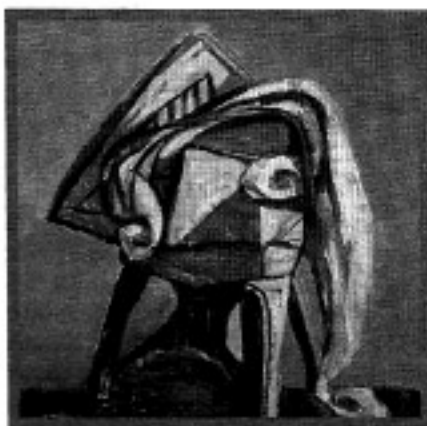
be based on natural forms, but the stories she depicts have oddly human resonance.

Harsh's powerful and cryptic oil paintings depict stacks or towers of discarded items or mysterious junk set in barren landscapes—in the artist's words, they are "jerry-rigged assemblies, sometimes fortress-like in appearance."

Although the forms are often ambiguous and have multiple

meanings, recognizable objects—ladders, doors, mirrors, drawers and pieces of rope or cloth—thread through the groupings, which are improvised from small sketches and then ruthlessly edited. According to Harsh, "In painting ... matter is never lost but changed." The objects seem to

Top: William Harsh, *Oracle*, 2007, oil on canvas, 36" x 36"; bottom: Mary Oros, *Blue Beast*, 2002, concrete, mixed media, 84" x 66" x 42", at Arts Benicia.



Reviews

Artweek

DEC 2008 / JAN 2009

Volume 39, pgs 13-14

be alive or imprinted with human life; in some works, they even assume the abstracted animal forms of frog (*Tropic Life* [2008]), tortoise (*Galapagos* [2008]) or mastodon (*Diorama* [2008]). Picasso and Beckmann are evident influences, as are de Chirico and Guston, but the works effectively and convincingly combine abstraction and figuration; what is depicted seems to be the result of competing constructive and destructive impulses that have battled to a draw. *Oracle* (2007), like Oros's *Home* (2004), presents a head sitting atop a tripod base, but in Harsh's painting, the helmet-like head regards us with a mysterious equanimity. *Colony* (2008) depicts what appears to be a cross between architecture and arthropod; it suggests both vitality and exploration while *Flood Wall* (2008), with its somber palette, was painted during hurricane and flood season and is appropriately both stoic and foreboding. The household objects compacted into a triangular wedge in *End of the Line* (2008) suggest the evacuation and scavenging associated with natural disaster. Harsh animates and metaphorizes his imagined still lives without falling into the trap of narrative; form and content evolve synchronously in his paintings.

Oros's and Harsh's intense subjectivity is their shared affinity. Both artists seek pictorial analogues for the invisible mysteries of the visible world; both circle the enigma of existence that most people deny or repress and their work requires imaginative effort from the viewer. Such aesthetic high-mindedness may have seemed as antediluvian as Galapagos tortoises in the bullish art market of recent memory, but after our recent financial deluge, perhaps we are ready again to get serious—to stop palling around with ironists in art or politics.

—DeWitt Cheng

Mary Oros and William Harsh—Affinities and Variations: circling the enigma closed November 23 at Arts Benicia Gallery.

DeWitt Cheng is a freelance writer based in San Francisco.