

Houston Press

Hilary Harnischfeger's Little Monsters at Front Gallery

By Meredith Deliso October 3, 2012

Hilary Harnischfeger's vessels have a natural earthiness to them. It's in the muted earth tones she uses, the purples, greens and blues; the materials that are regular players in natural history museum gift shops -- quartz, mica, pyrite (aka Fool's Gold); and the organic shape they take on, as if they've been weathered by wind and rain.

At the same time, these pieces aren't anything close to what you'd find in nature. The materials are forced together like some sort of sculptural Frankenstein's monster, with plaster stuck to clay stuffed with layers of multi-colored paper. It shouldn't work, but there's an intelligent design here that keeps it all from falling apart.

Seven of Harnischfeger's newest works, fresh out of the kiln, are now up on the walls of Front Gallery. The artist splits her time between Brooklyn and Ohio but is no stranger to Houston, having earned her BFA in painting from the University of Houston in 2001 before jetting off to an MFA program at Columbia University. She's making a name for herself these days with these clay formations, and it's easy to see why when confronted with them. They have an order and



"Hutch" by Hilary Harnischfeger

process to them that is mystifying for artists and non-artists alike, and the fact that all of these elementary materials work together is pleasantly surprising.

One of the standout pieces isn't Harnischfeger's off-kilter vessels at all but a mask hanging above the gallery's fireplace. It's a striking piece of abstraction, thanks in no small part to the rare, vibrant yellow she uses. It's the boldest piece in the gallery and is fittingly called "Joy," named after Front Gallery owner Sharon Engelstein's daughter. I wish there were more like it.

Harnischfeger's sculptures are accompanied by 27 collage drawings by her husband, Tommy White. White has an impressive resume -- he is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship, and the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Award -- though he takes backseat here to his wife.

Twenty-seven works by one artist is a lot for even bigger spaces than Front to manage, but arranged as they are all on one wall in a grid, their abundance makes it hard to contemplate each on its own and they become muddled. That might even be the point -- White hasn't named any of them, and with repeated reds and pinks used across the board they look like they could be puzzle pieces to some weird, grotesque phallic imagery. But it was hard to get into the drawings in the first place, especially when pulled back to Harnischfeger's little monsters.

Hilary Harnischfeger and Tommy White at Front Gallery, 1412 Bonnie Brae St., runs now through October 27. For more information, call 713-298-4750 or visit frontgallery.com.



"Joy" by Hilary Harnischfeger