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Seedlings

Dallas Contemporary, Dallas

by Alison Hearst from ...might be good
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Hilary Berseth, Programmed Hive #6, 2008

A seedling is a young, freshly sprouted plant slated for greater growth – growth that is both rooted and aimed towards the sky. *SEEDLINGS*, curated by Regine Basha, is the current exhibition at the Dallas Contemporary's relatively new building. Included are works by New York-based artists David Brooks, Jedediah Ceasar, Hilary Harnischfeger, Christopher Ho, Virginia Poundstone, Gilad Ratman and Lucy Raven, as well as Texans Hilary Berseth and Jessica Halonen. As the exhibition's title indicates, the artists are all emerging, budding talents. Comprised of video, sculptures, installations and works on paper, the show explores contemporary environmental issues. The works themselves are engaging and thematically grounded, focusing in on the various collaborations and clashes that result from the increasing juncture between the natural and the man-made.

David Brooks' *Still Life with Cherry Picker and Palms* (2009/2010) greets the viewer in the large, lofty main gallery. The industrial cherry picker's arm is outstretched towards

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the ceiling, cradling a dozen or so live palms in its basket. Cramped within the basket and smashed against the ceiling's rafters, the palms illustrate uncomfortable amalgamations of industry and nature, and the familiar, yet forced inclusions of nature in unnatural habitats (like galleries, for instance). Also touching on such themes, albeit in a more harmonious approach, are Hilary Harnischfeger's captivating works that pair raw minerals with man-made media. Like Harnischfeger's other two pieces in the exhibition, *Mantle* (2009) is a wall panel that, from a distance, reads like an abstracted landscape painting. Once approached, however, the works are entirely object-like. *Mantle* resembles an exaggerated topographical map made from layers of handmade paper, embedded rose quartz and muddy toned ink washes. Harnischfeger uses natural materials to her advantage, which, contrary to Brooks' piece, effortlessly synchronize with the man-made.

The two video works, Gilad Ratman's *The x initial initial;* >588 PROJECT (2009) and Lucy Raven's *China Town* (2009) offer disparate portrayals of humans versus their ecosystems, which underscores an interesting duality within the exhibit. Ratman's meditative film portrays several bog divers immersed in the swamp. The divers' heads resemble mud bubbles as they emerge and blow grey mud through plastic tubing that's attached to musical recorders; in turn, spooky, monotonous tones are emitted. The mud swathes the divers, rendering them anonymous and secondary within their seemingly unspoiled surroundings. Raven's film, on the other hand, tracks the production of copper wiring from a Nevada mine to a Chinese smelter. Tracing this process through an animated series of photo stills, Raven depicts man's conquest and exploitation of the earth for industry and commodity. Wound around a huge spool in the Chinese smelter, the copper's end result could not seem further removed from its natural origins.

Illustrating man's overt controlling and tailoring of the natural is Hilary Berseth's sculpture, *Programmed Hive #6* (2008). By fashioning an armature of wax and wire within a wooden box, Berseth allows bee colonies to create the sculpture by building their own natural, honeycomb hive on top of the artist's man-made, "programmed" hive. The resulting oddly conical-shaped honeycomb sculpture is an alluring example of a prescribed, yet visually advantageous collaboration between the artist and the bees. Part of an exhibited suite of gouaches on paper, Jessica Halonen's *RxGarden: Untitled (VePesid)* (2009) juxtaposes brightly colored octagonal shapes with whimsical, leafy organic branches. While subtle in visual information and seemingly innocuous, Halonen's *RxGarden* series sets to illustrate the genetic altering of plants in the pharmaceutical industry – humanity's attempts to control and modify nature for the purported betterment of mankind, but also for a profit.

An odd inclusion (with audio often disrupting Ratman's film) is the looped behind-the-scenes exhibition documentary in the back end of the gallery. Here, Basha explains the premise of the exhibition, the exhibition process, and how the guest-curator spot was offered to her even before the details of the new space were ironed out – a situation that manifests itself in the overall feel of the show. As the term "seedlings" also implies, many of the artworks look diminutive – dwarfed by the monstrous gallery space. This is an unfortunate effect that visually leaves the pieces struggling for the sunlight. Working with new spaces, however, often proves difficult and one should be forgiving as, overall, the works themselves are strong, and also because the Contemporary is a promising seedling itself.

Alison Hearst is the Curatorial Research Assistant at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth and a co-founder of Subtext Projects.

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