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In the galleries: Shiny fantasy worlds, undercut by body parts and company logos

By Mark Jenkins



The veneer of luxury fascinates and repels Jonathan Monaghan. The local artist's computer-animated videos, two of which are in Spagnuolo Gallery's "Mothership," depict gleaming fantasy worlds of space-age vehicles, ornate historical architecture and the sort of decorative items peddled on exclusive shopping streets. But grafted onto these fancy facades are body parts not generally acknowledged in polite society. Sacs, sphincters and such are integral elements of Monaghan's compositions, and their presence suggests the influence of Matthew Barney's "Cremaster" films.

The show is made up of large color prints, black-and-white sketches and videos whose narratives spin in ceaseless loops. (All are produced with commercially available software.) The title piece is more explicit in its representation of a branded universe. Corporate logos abound, and Monaghan comments on both their ubiquity and their blankness: A spaceship carries the erstwhile "AA" insignia of American Airlines alongside one for another "AA" — American Apparel. Logos vary and shift but always promote a cycle of consumption as perpetual as those roundabout video scenarios.



Jonathan Monaghan's "Mothership," on view at Spagnuolo Gallery. (Jonathan Monaghan)

The longer and more recent "Escape Pod" centers on a duty-free shop that would fit a Pixar remake of "2001: A Space Odyssey." Although some of Monaghan's creations incorporate fleshy bits, no full humans appear. Here the protagonist is a deer — mobile as if alive, yet glittering like pure gold. The animal arrives via floating pod, explores the extraterrestrial shopping mall and later reappears, amusingly, in a section of the tale set in what appears to a model upscale apartment in outer space. The deer resembles a piece of jewelry come to life, but it's also one of the few things in "Escape Pod" that doesn't proceed with the stately, lumbering motion of an intergalactic ocean liner. The creature offers the possibility of spontaneity in a programmed cosmos.

That's an illusion, of course. Every 20 minutes, our golden friend will pop out from the exact same hiding place, as reliable as a post-holiday sale.