

Art Review: No smoke, but lots of mirrors in fun ICA show

By DANIEL KANY

Contemporary art is unpredictable. Sometimes it is dark and difficult, but every once in a while contemporary art is smart, fun and accessible to everyone -- like the show about mirrors now on view at the Maine College of Art's Institute of Contemporary Art.

"Fracturing the Burning Glass: Between Mirror and Meaning" is an agonizing title, but the exhibition, I assure you, is anything but. "Mirrors" features 11 installations and works by four artists: Gwenael Belanger, Susan Leopold, Daniel Rozin and Alyson Shotz.

The most exciting are works by Rozin. His "Peg Mirror" features several hundred wooden dowels whose tips have been cut at an angle. When you stand in front of the piece, a tiny camera at its center instructs the pegs to spin so that your form is marked by pegs slanted in a particular direction.

The rumbling of the pegs as they respond to your movements is charming in itself, but as you see how they are mirroring you, "Peg" moves from fun to phenomenal.

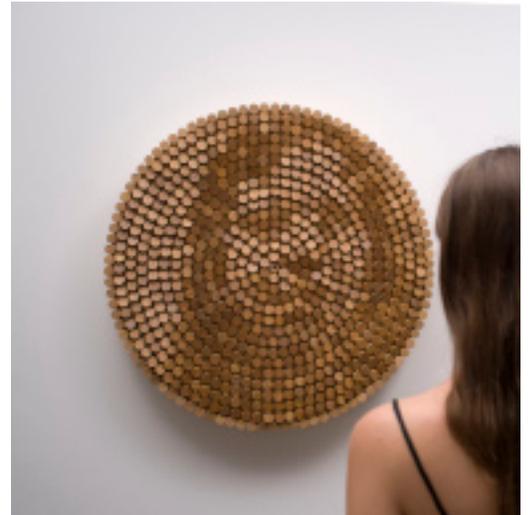
It's almost impossible not to play in front of "Peg Mirror," but the piece turns you into a child in another key way. You don't immediately recognize the piece as a mirror -- rather, you have to discover it.

This sense of discovery echoes Jacques Lacan's "mirror stage," a transcendent developmental threshold when a child can discover his individual subjectivity by recognizing himself in a mirror. Following Lacan, this theme is pervasive in literary theory and contemporary art.

Rozin's other pieces are no less exciting. In an elegantly darkened room, bits of digital white "snow" flow down through a black field. Moments after your arrival, an image slowly forms, and dissolves unless you stand still. Subtly and barely, it's you.

There is little doubt, however, that "Mirror's" crowd pleaser will be Rozin's irresistible "Weave Mirror," in which 768 paper cylinders, each with its own little motor, dutifully spin to present your image on an impressive contraption hanging from the ceiling like a futuristic midair painting. The smartly organized grid of electronics on the back of the piece beckons attention as well with a few red lights, reminding the viewer that it is hard at work.

The most ambitious piece in the show, Leopold's "The Yellow Wallpaper," is an installation within a small, mirrored space. She uses three cameras, but this time to project domestic interior imagery onto something like a large, spinning dollhouse. Ladders reach up through the spaces, peppered with tiny windows, doors and mirrors.



Rozin's "Peg Mirror," 2007

Courtesy of the Vince Irwin Collection

Alyson Shotz's "Arnolfini 360 Degrees x 12," 2006

Courtesy of the artist and Derek Eller Gallery, New York





Gwenaél Belanger's "Carré gris" (left), 2010, and Daniel Rozin's "Weave Mirror," 2007

The installation's surrounding mirrors add a dizzying but energized sense of movement that fascinates in contrast to the stop-motion sense of subjectivity when you catch yourself gazing back at yourself again and again in the many and varied mirrors surrounding the space.

Leopold's piece is based on the 1892 text "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilmore. While I think the feminist ideas at stake are both interesting and important, Leopold's work does nothing with the content but reference the story.

It's not enough simply to reference theoretical concepts or arcane texts. A work that doesn't throw light on a reference only comes across as empty name-dropping. As a kinetic sculpture, "The Yellow Wallpaper" is terrific. In terms of Gilmore's text, it's disappointing.

I feel the same way about Shotz's "Arnolfini 360 Degrees x 12." The group of 12 fish-eye mirrors really pops. You see the other 11 mirrors in each of them and then again reflected inside the other reflections, and so on. It's a cool example of parabolic or fractal mathematics, but it's wounded by the title, which references -- without otherwise commenting on -- an important 1434 painting by Jan van Eyck that features a convex mirror as a heartfelt metaphor for the Christian artist's omniscient God. Forcing a reading of the van Eyck only makes the Shotz seem slick and snide.

If you let your eyes and body guide your experience, the "Arnolfini" piece is strong, and Shotz's "Luminous Armory" -- dozens of tall, slender and solidly squared mirrors stacked against a wall -- is explosively gorgeous.

Two of my favorite works in "Mirrors" are Belanger's video loop and photographic triptych of breaking mirrors in his studio. The camera in "Le Tournis" (dizzy) spins in the center of the artist's studio with frantic stop-action rhythm that shatters the event of the dropping of a mirror over the course of two minutes. The effect is mesmerizing and unlike anything I have ever seen.

Belanger's "Carre gris" is a photographic triptych of a large mirror (or three?) shattering while being dropped onto another. Once again, the work itself is gorgeous and fascinating within its own parameters. We see high-quality photography of something we may never see again. Belanger (from Montreal, while the others are from New York City) even lets himself be seen behind the camera in one of the shots to let us know what he is up to -- and I find that clarity refreshing.



Alyson Shotz's "Luminous Harmonic," 2008
Courtesy of the artist and Derek Eller Gallery, New York

It's key to distinguish between concepts that inspire art and the content of that art. This show may be driven largely by sophisticated critical theory, but its best works don't solely depend on it.

"Mirrors" is beautifully installed, and features excellent work by several rising stars of the art world. It's smart. It's fun. And by all means -- take the kids.