

Black Gold: Petroleum by-products fuel Marina Zurkow's provocative *Necrocracy* FotoFest show



Marina Zurkow, "Mesocosm (Wink, Texas)," 2012, color, animation and sound, software-driven animation in a 144-hour year-long cycle (never repeats), commissioned by Diverseworks



Marina Zurkow, "HazMat Suits for Children," 2012, Tychem® TK fabric, acrylic, Velcro, rubber and mannekin with fabrication by Lara Grant; Tychem® TK fabric courtesy of DuPont

Set off by a red wall in the gallery, this mostly black-and-white cartoon greets the viewer with a friendly voice: "Hello, folks, I'm a carbon atom. I act as if I have four arms." Those arms grab other atoms and soon the entire screen fills to the point of chaos with the black bodies of carbon atoms and the cacophony of their layered voices.

The cartoon quite cannily makes these anthropomorphic atoms mime the forms of overpopulation that lead to energy depletion. It's hard not to be utterly hypnotized and horrified by the spectacle as the humor of these chatty carbon atoms fades into discomfort.

Who rules the planet — the living or the dead? If you were to ask artist Marina Zurkow, whose provocative *Necrocracy* appears at DiverseWorks in association with FotoFest 2012 and runs through April 21, I bet she'd tell you, "No contest: the dead."

For Zurkow, the dead are omnipresent. She's not thinking of the human ghosts of the past. Nor, for that matter, the decomposing bodies of the earth's former inhabitants, though that gets closer to the heart of *Necrocracy*, the name of which refers to the rule of the dead.

The prominent deceased of Zurkow's show are the living things whose decomposition produces valuable hydrocarbons in form of oil and gas reserves.

As inhabitants of an oil-hungry nation and an energy-centered state, how not to think about black gold all the time? Petroleum and its many plastic and rubber products are literally all around us, more numerous than the dead. How does an artist focus our attention on things so omnipresent they are literally the background material of nearly all we do in the world?

Zurkow's art is clearly embedded in the thinking of philosophers and environmental activists who wish to focus attention on the way seemingly inert, inanimate objects are in fact active presences with agency to reshape our lives.

Unsettling shift

This potentially unsettling shift in perspective begins with a set of figures garbed in neon green protective gear against a purple wall. "HazMat Suits for Children" are slightly off in color from the iconic yellow suits of toxic cleanup coverage.

The scale is disturbingly small. They are designed, according to the gallery notes, for toddlers, and make us wonder just what kind of future we're creating for generations to come. With dark protective visors, a viewer can't look in, and they we assume they're empty, who knows who might be looking out.

There's a disturbingly child-like quality, too, in the captivating animation "Hydrocarbons," which manipulates a 1949 industrial cartoon called "The Inside Story of Modern Gasoline."

Vertical banners

Inside the main gallery hang 50 vertical banners that comprise “The Petroleum Manga.” Although the title references a particular style of Japanese comic or picture book, the images depicted look like they’re drawn from industrial schematics or assembly instructions from IKEA. Each banner features, grouped according to petrochemical composition, a series of objects dependent upon petroleum: Brassieres, Pampers, condoms, flashlights, cell phones, riot shields, Mexican votive candles, Vaseline, crayons, and rubber chickens.

The fascination of these banners lies in their everyday clarity but also in what seems, to me, like an awfully clever pun on traditional ideas about art. The banners are made of Tyvek, a dense weave of polyethylene fibers patented by DuPont. Difficult to tear and impermeable to liquid, this is a substance made to last. In an ecological age in which toddlers might need to wear HazMat suits, perhaps beauty is a plastic flower or rubber chicken and immortality is Tyvek.

And while a Picasso may be priceless, you can still sign up to receive, for free, one of these banners at the end of the show. Zurkow even encourages people to alter the works and send documentation of the results to her. Talk about recycle and reuse! I went for the harp. Artist and owner of G Gallery, Wayne Gilbert, beat me to the rubber chicken. Interested in a trade, Wayne?

Ecological crisis

Zurkow works beautifully and hauntingly with animation and video as she details the ever-widening impact of oil. “NeoGeo I-IV” present in small, silver-sheathed television screen, four 12-minute rendering of oil drills bursting through sedimented layers of earth. The drill moves at different velocities depending on the substance through which it travels. As I watched, transfixed, by these images in the Flicker Lounge I thought about how much there is to be learned from these petroleum extraction technologies. I also thought about how easy it is to be fascinated and entertained by the unfolding ecological crisis we live in. I also thought this: perhaps Barak Obama might have thought better about caving to pressure to fast-track the Keystone XL pipeline if he had seen Zurkow’s show. Economic urgencies can blind us to the long, slow processes of the earth and to the long-term effects of short-term decisions.

This is nowhere more apparent than in the beautifully gradual nature of Zurkow’s “Mesocosm (Wink, Texas),” a video-installation of animated landscapes around the “Wink Sink 2” a sinkhole in Wink, Tex. DiverseWorks funded Zurkow on a two-week trip to the Permian Basin, where she met with ranchers, oil industry workers, geologists, ecologists and more. The resulting exhibition is proof of the value of continuing financial support for artists.

In the distance, an oil refinery burns off gas as the sinkhole and its surroundings respond to the changing of day, week, and season. Plastic bags with smiley faces blow out of the hole, owls fly overhead, coyotes scout the area, and sometimes HazMat-suited workers crawl across the land.

If we learn anything from *Necrocracy* it’s this. The living may reside on the earth, but death fuels our pursuits. Could there be a better time to think about what relationship to death we care to cultivate?



Marina Zurkow, Still from “Mesocosm (Wink, TX),” 2012, software-driven animation, color and sound, ongoing computer generated



Marina Zurkow, “The Petroleum Manga,” 2012, 50 banners, solvent ink on Tyvek, commissioned by DiverseWorks