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# Cutouts, shadows, lines: Art of storytelling in two CAC shows

BY JOHN D'ADDARIO | Special to The Advocate APR 10, 2018 - 2:00 PM



Two current shows at the Contemporary Arts Center take a very different approach to telling a story.

For Swedish artist Jockum Nordström, stories are told through pencil drawings, often cut up and reassembled as collages and three-dimensional objects.

The seemingly naive quality of Nordström's work is deceptive: There's a lot more going on in these crudely drawn depictions and rickety assemblages than meets the eye.

Many of Nordström's collages have a voyeuristic aspect to them. They're like peeks into the everyday activities and private dramas of his characters. One large piece is like looking into a two-dimensional brothel.

In others, Nordström's figures share space with pieces of architecture, which are repeated within and across different works to the point where they practically become recognizable characters themselves.

Some of those buildings are recreated in 3-D form via piles of empty matchboxes, which are transformed into structures resembling soulless housing blocks or components of an office park. The effect is both comical and heroic: What building block could be more insignificant and flimsy than an empty matchbox? Yet the structures have a kind of monumentality that belies their diminutive scale.

Scale also plays a part in the large piece which gives the show its title: "Why Is Everything A Rag," a site-specific installation in which silhouettes of shapes and figures seem to grow and diminish as they float across a constantly shifting expanse of multicolored lights.

At first look, the piece appears to be a video projection. But it's actually a sort of live performance: Dozens of Nordström's drawings and collage fragments are attached to rotating gears and wheels and lit from behind with their shadows projected on a screen, all accompanied by a looped and warped soundtrack of musical samples.

Nordström has long been influenced by the musical and improvisational culture of New Orleans, and jazz motifs turn up in several works in the show. And as jazz performers themselves, Nordström and his collaborator Joakim Ahlund played at the Hi-Ho Lounge on St. Claude Avenue during the opening weekend of the show in late March.

Elsewhere in the show, an animated video of a man cleaning his house while fantasizing about sex and adventure has a mordantly funny quality that belies its origin as a cartoon produced for children. A nearby vitrine full of his designs for book covers and album sleeves shed light on his creative process; the incredible detail on some of the collages in particular are ample evidence of Nordström's considerable formal talents.

Downstairs at the CAC, American artist Sarah Morris creates different kinds of stories - ones which "investigate ... urban, social, and bureaucratic typologies" and "(seize) on behavioral, architectural, and aesthetic redundancies" according to the text accompanying the exhibition.

But it's difficult to immediately connect those ideas to Morris' colorful and meticulously rendered paintings, which bear the names of cities like Rio De Janeiro and Abu Dhabi and remain appealing despite being saddled with an elusive conceptual framework.

Morris' narratives about capitalism and culture are easier to parse in the two short films included in the exhibition. One juxtaposes the workaday process of making lingerie items in a Brazilian factory with the erotically charged advertising imagery which sells them.

Another focuses on moments where industrial activity meets high end luxury production. A scene of women picking roses in a field is followed by those same roses being unceremoniously dumped in a tank and processed for their scent, while dreamy aerial views of the Bois de Boulogne in Paris are disrupted by scenes of a massive construction project taking place within it. The film's haunting minimalist score creates a sense of tension despite the lack of explicit narrative.

The carefully composed tableaux hover intriguingly between critique and celebration. And if the overall effect veers close to a high end perfume commercial, that's likely part of Morris' intent: the piece premiered in 2014 at the opening of the Fondation Louis Vuitton, the private museum designed by Frank Gehry whose construction is depicted in the video.

It's moments like these when Morris' art says the most.

“Jockum Nordström: Why Is Everything A Rag” and “Sarah Morris: Sawdust and Tinsel”

WHEN: Through June 17

WHERE: Contemporary Arts Center

900 Camp St.

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