

Marnie Weber at the Luckman Gallery, CSU Los Angeles

Honesty. Marnie Weber's multi-dimensional work thrives on it. We may never be the dancing bear in the magical

mirror and, yet, we recognize some remote aspect of who we are and how we survive this fragile existence in her costumes, sculptures, photography, collage, video and performance. The seamless interaction of these multiple media reinforces her construction of a world that is intimately connected to our own.

Weber's first survey exhibition in the United States, *From the Dark Room*, at Cal State Los Angeles's Luckman Gallery, is gleaned from four bodies of work over the past decade, none of which has been shown in this country before.

The exhibition includes a one-night only—extended to two by demand—performance of a new opera *The Spirit Girls, Songs that Never Die* in the Luckman's Intimate Theatre. The words "new" and "opera" only begin to define the performance which begins with a set of bare, papery trees on wheels lit by a large screen showing a moving image of the tattered red curtains that frame it. The scope of the performance, like the rest of Weber's work, cannot be reduced to one image or moment (though I am tempted to isolate Weber's perfectly struck balance of awkward elegance while singing the eerily resonant "I am not a bunny" in a gold, cotton-tailed suit). While the performance unifies Weber's multilayered work, the work in the gallery holds together on its own, rendering the performance an amplification and extension of her ideas.

Visitors are greeted by *The Warthog*, a grumpy pink man-sized animal/costume, resplendent in his grinchiness. Frozen between door and room, he carries a string of brown plastic eggs with such certainty that we don't question their purpose, a common thread in Weber's work where the extraordinary becomes commonplace and the day-to-day reveals its inherent absurdity. The warthog is holding his eggs again in a dark forest surrounding the reclining, or maybe dying, snail/woman in the video *The Forgotten*, and *The Snail* from the same video reappears on the gallery floor, apparently suspended mid-conversation. What may seem odd or bizarre outside of Weber's work does not seem so at all from the inside, transporting the viewer into an alternate space.

Though characters appear and reappear, they often seem lost, as set apart from one another as we are from them, with only the recurrence of a fantastical version of nature to connect them. Animals and water, rocks and snow, flowers, leaves, birds and branches often carry more emotional charge than the females who alternately pose, gaze, ignore or stare out from the picture plane with detachment. In *The Dollhouse*, an oversized version of a child's plaything with a fantastic array of rooms, a tree with fall leaves grows in one room and a cave is buried in another. A blue-green waterfall cascades down the double staircase in the parlor and the attic is a

surreal oceanic flood. Collages from *The Dollhouse* series are constructed on photographs of the sculpture. Weber is known for her early use of photographs of women from skin magazines, cut out and collaged onto idyllic settings; in this uncanny series the women have morphed into doll/woman/girl/mannequin figures.

In *The Whispering Cave* a woman sits perched on a bed floating in the watery bottom of a stalactite filled cave. She is wearing ballet slippers and is composed of pieces, part doll, part woman, part girl. Significantly, what predominates is not the cutting or the taking apart, but the coming together, as if the pieces were waiting for Weber to come along and set them right in a sort of cubism for the cloning age. In this same vein, an amazing array of mannequin and female faces hang upside down from bat wings on the crusty cave wall.

Weber's use of handmade environments in *The Dollhouse* series adds dimension and signifies a move towards creating a more isolated, or maybe just more independent, world than that of earlier pieces in the *Getty* and *Graveyard* series that are more dependent on their source imagery. Each of the collages in the former is made a photograph of a period room from the *Getty*. In *Sweet Dreams*, a woman sits coquettishly on a vast blue four-poster bed. Her legs caught in a snarl of roots or vines, she is surrounded by two figures draped as ghosts with animal ears, another common sight in Weber-land. The beauty of this piece lies in the limited intervention to the picture plane to achieve this degree of altered reality.

In the *Graveyard* series, collages are built onto photographs of one of Los Angeles's most famous cemeteries. Flowers and birds and eggs provide a source of life in a space haunted with death. In *The White Horse* oversized flow-



Marnie Weber, *The Trophy Room*, 2002, collage on photograph, at the Luckman Gallery, California State University, Los Angeles.

ers in saturated shades bloom improbably from a dark tree and a woman in white gazes at us as she leans away from a rearing white horse. Alternately leaning into and away from her strange and lovely imagery, the artist gives the work both

the depth of her emotional investment, and the singularity and confidence of a world unto itself.



Artweek