



Sharks, Symbols and Simulacra

Three exhibitions rich in imagery and narrative open the Weston Art Gallery's new season

MATT MORRIS // SEP 23, 2009

In the Weston's first exhibitions of the season, Ryan Mulligan, Casey Riordan Millard and Michael Sharber reinforce the overt qualities of fantasy and illustration in one another's work, while also calling attention to more understated emo-aesthetics and pseudo-spirituality.

Ryan Mulligan's seriously funny installation *I'll Just Ask Dad* is being shown in the Weston's street-level space. Mulligan was born and schooled in Virginia earning both his bachelor's and

master's degrees from Virginia Commonwealth. He is currently a professor in the fine arts department at the University of Cincinnati.

Mulligan's illustrative sets, drawings and props are bursting with diaristic reflections and humble confession. It may help if viewers know going into it that Mulligan's father passed away several years ago. He has exhibited works and enacted performance pieces in our region for a few years that roam erratically around this central trauma. But Mulligan rarely presents the facts in a clear-cut voice seeking sympathy; rather, his installations tease the edges of real life events outward into fantasy, anecdote and the occasional worrisome dream.

The keystone of the exhibition is "Mission Control Desk," a desk set up with props resembling outmoded computer terminals and sci-fi devices. Reminiscent of old episodes of *Lost in Space* or *Dr. Who*, this range of equipment is meant to possess special powers to contact the dead, specifically the artist's deceased father. But its intentionally shoddy construction betrays a cloud of doubt that surrounds the effectiveness of the device.



From project to project, the specifics of what Mulligan raises for discussion mutates with the attention-disorder of a Warner Bros. cartoon. But what is consistent is the neatly philosophical edge to Mulligan's skeptical imagination. His fantastical environments are hardly believable, nor are they meant to be otherwise. The moody personality and deflated self-confidence Local

artist Ryan Mulligan's "Dad's Coaster" assigned to the artist in Mulligan's work undermines the hypotheses that abound throughout. He stages simulacra that call us on the lies we tell ourselves and is at once disappointed in their falsehood and amused by their whimsy.

The level of whimsy only escalates as visitors to the two lower level galleries are greeted by the beginning of Casey Riordan Millard's *Virtue in the Struggle*. Millard received her BFA from Ohio University in Athens and established her bright career during a decade in Chicago. Millard notably received a 2008 City of Cincinnati Individual Artist Grant; this totally enjoyable exhibition is evidence of city money well spent.

The central character of Millard's works on paper and sculpture is Shark Girl, a slender bodied waif with the head of a wide-eyed shark that is dressed in a poofy Alice in Wonderland skirt. Shark Girl's adventures are plagued with emotional struggle, like those of the Vivienne Girls in outsider artist's Henry Darger's dark saga. The pathetic and disruptive qualities that lace the cuteness in Millard's work really show off the flipside of "cute." In the wise Daniel Harris' book *Cute, Quaint, Hungry and Romantic*, he offers, "The grotesque is cute because the grotesque is pitiable, and pity is the primary emotion of this seductive and manipulative aesthetic that arouses our sympathies. The aesthetic of cuteness creates ... a ready-made race of loveable inferiors."

Perhaps the most surprising image features Shark Girl swollen with pregnancy. Above the figure, penciled text reads: "I'm sorry I can't save you. I can't even save myself." A group of bluebirds that regularly accompany Shark Girl on her adventures all look away, as if in shame.

Millard's *piece de résistance* is "Shark Girl with Dead Rainbow," a life-sized diorama in which her heroine is seated in *Pieta* posture on a tree stump in the midst of a flowering forest; joined by a snail, a beetle and one of several renderings of the Eye of Providence found in the exhibition. Across her lap is the fabric "dead rainbow." I might say that Shark Girl looks grievous, but it is hard to ever know what she's feeling when her mouth is always dropped open in a frown, as anatomically befits a shark. The anonymity of that sharkhead invites empathy and self-identification from viewers.

Also on view is Michael Sharber's *Form as Cognitive System*. Sharber studied at Middle Tennessee State University and University of Cincinnati before settling in Santa Fe, N.M., in 1982. The works in the exhibition are playful, loopy takes on traditional fresco painting.

Sometimes Sharber's dense imagery proves a little difficult to absorb, with every kind of symbol floating together around often-mustached cartoon figures and their escapades. A

periodic table plus an infinity loop plus a grail plus a pile of crosses add up to a Symbolist soup of uncertain meaning. A catalogue of symbols is problematic because of the inevitable subjective filter through which we all articulate things to ourselves. Sharber's "House as Hat" series feels instinctively like more personal, or at least more specific, storytelling.

He, along with Mulligan and Millard, are at their strongest when they allow and control the bleed of their personal lives into the richly ambiguous terrains that each put forth in their work.

Weston Art Gallery displays exhibitions by Ryan Mulligan, Casey Riordan Millard and Michael Sharber through Dec. 6.

<https://www.citybeat.com/arts-culture/visual-arts/article/13016281/sharks-symbols-and-simulacra>