

Review: Allison Schulnik, “Mound”

Kitschy subjects turn into meditations on decay.

By Jennifer Coates



Allison Schulnik, Cat Head
Photograph: Courtesy ZieherSmith

When I walked into Allison Schulnik’s show on a drizzly afternoon and heard “It’s Raining Today” by Scott Walker, the late-’60s pop-star-turned-recluse, the melodramatic voice filling the gallery suddenly gave the irritating weather a certain existential pathos. The tune wafts from the titular stop-animation video projected on a wall, the centerpiece of Schulnik’s latest outing, which also includes several paintings and small ceramic sculptures. The film features, among other things, a choreographed dance by hunched-over witches, and various sad clowns mutating into twisted lumps of clay.

But it is the paintings that steal the show. Flower Mound, a huge diptych, depicts another sad clown, as well as a few stray animals subsumed by a hillock of blossoms, each appearing to revel in its bulbous swelling and material squishiness. The radiant heap is shrouded in darkness, evoking menace as the figures disappear into it. On another canvas, a vase filled with drooping flowers sits in sodden whiteness. The focal point, a raw, red bloom, looks like an organ or a tumor. The potentially decorative subject turns metaphysical: a meditation on death and disintegration.

Schulnik squeezes out paint, playing with it in a comic and childlike affirmation of the transformative potential of colored goo. Piles of glossy pigment take on the quality of relief sculpture. Color is troweled on almost as a kind of protection—for pets hiding in the clumps, or for clowns who mask their true identities behind ever-thickening layers of makeup. But the exaggerated physicality of Schulnik’s paintings also, curiously, lends them a sense of vulnerability, as if each form or character is saying, “I can’t help what I am.”