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Review

Jeffry Mitchell tenderly subverts at Ambach & Rice



"Oranges" by Jeffry Mitchell at Ambach & Rice. (Heather Rasmussen / Ambach & Rice)

What to make of art that greets you with a friendly "HELLO"? That encourages you to "SMILE!" That abounds in flowers and frills and kitty cats?

In the case of Jeffry Mitchell's work, be grateful. Accept the invitation in the open spirit with which it is extended. The Seattle-based artist's work, now at Ambach & Rice, endears itself but doesn't ingratiate. It complicates and challenges in its mix of the cute and the carnal, its conflation of the human and humane.

Mitchell uses a panoply of media, two- and three-dimensional. Here, he shows a grouping of tabletop figures in glazed earthenware, and a series of wall reliefs in Hydrostone.

The pale gray plaster has a deadness and anonymity to it that Mitchell counters with exuberance and those friendly personal appeals. He adorns the edges of the panels with scalloped trim and turns mounting holes into eyes, making of the dry, tomb-like surfaces something juicy and giddily alive. Mitchell grabs holds of aesthetic conventions associated

with the feminine (light, ornamental, sentimental) and instead of shaking them loose gives them an exceedingly tight squeeze.

The clay figures, soupily glazed in dark emerald, are squat, mustachioed men often defined by profession. There's a carpenter in the group, a doctor and two cooks. What is compelling about these humble characters is how they play out the extremes of human drama, from the mythic expulsion to everyday domestic partnership.

A gay man raised Catholic, Mitchell has said that shame is the motivating force of his work. Out of that tough place, he has created work refreshingly subversive in its tenderness. An especially warm hello to that.