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Thomas Woodruff at the California State University Art Museum

Michael Duncan

With his penchant for fantasy, strange whimsy and illustrative draftsmanship, Thomas Woodruff is sometimes lumped with willfully low figurative artists, such as Mark Ryden and Robert Williams. But Woodruff offers more than their brand of satirical surrealism and twisted children's-book illustration. As evidenced in previous cycles of elegiac, poignant works addressing the effects of the AIDS pandemic, Woodruff has made life-enhancing, allegorical art of heart-wrenching sincerity and moral rectitude.

Moving into a lighter realm, he presents "Freak Parade" (2000-05), 34 large mixed-medium works on paper, all drawn in black charcoal, variously articulated with layers of acrylic and white charcoal pencil, and garnished with rhinestones. Attached to the wall with nails through grommets in the manner of circus posters, 32 of the sheets portray outlandish parade participants and floats, most with costumed characters, all titled and described in filigreed text. The two remaining pieces offer texts as introduction and coda. A poetic wall text by the artist sets the scene.

The floats honor an outre community of misfits and hybrids brought together by their quirky independence and uninhibited expression. What Woodruff's wall text calls "a celebration of all things aberrant" goes beyond predictable sideshow fare and includes animals fierce and tame (from the frightening tattooed panther of Bruised Beast to the cuddly myopic unicorn of Miss Giggles), vegetables (Man of Lettuce) and minerals (the cigar-smoking coral creature of Smoke and Mirrors).

With finely rendered detail and rich, saturated color, Woodruff inspires awe of the weird and wonderful. The swaggering tuber of Legendary Bulb models a flowering headdress netted with gossamer spiderwebs that outdoes the headgear of the most lavish 18th-century courtesan. Pansy and Faggot depicts an intertwined couple: a blossom festooned with a wildflower wreath and a twig sporting a feathered hat. Elaborate calligraphy below tells us that they march to "new lilting music and lyrics by Kander and Ebb." Other queer, mobile conglomerations like the serpent-filled Cobra Balloon and the harp-playing, bubble-blowing simian of Monkey Sees seem flights of fancy, inviting openness to freewheeling possibility.

Woodruff orders the parade by rendering in each of the works a delicate chain or ribbon that connects to one drawn in the next. Following the numbered sequence of works through several galleries and a hallway, the viewer is himself engaged in a kind of parade march, swept up in the cavalcade of the bizarre. Woodruff's text alerts us to the "stunning conclusion" of the event, which takes the form of a float so long as to require five sheets

to document its elaborate components. Made of filigreed coral and moving on ice skates, this extravagant vehicle features a carrot-crowned snowman and a viscous-looking, composite vegetal Christmas tree.

Woodruff's mobile cabinet of wonders offers a kind of ipso facto sociopolitical critique, defying the parameters of conformist Bush-era America. He honors our culture's magnificent underbelly, which keeps on ornamenting, decorating and strutting its stuff, come what may. [Thomas Woodruff's "Freak Parade" will be on view at the Herron School of Art and Design, Indianapolis, Sept. 5-Oct. 20.]