



FEATURED

No, seriously.

Heidi Schwegler's "Botched Execution" at Marylhurst's The Art Gym

APRIL 30, 2015 // FEATURED, VISUAL ART // PATRICK COLLIER

All of us have heard the stories of scheduled executions in which the condemned did not die in an expeditious manner so additional measures had to be taken to complete the job. In art we talk about the act of creating a work of art as an "execution," which might lead one to wonder what to expect from [Heidi Schwegler](#) in her "[Botched Execution](#)" at [The Art Gym](#). What we do find is a well-represented set of mixed media and found object constructions Heidi Schwegler has made during the past 10 years. The title suggests a gallows humor, which comes through in a few of her works, while many other pieces in this show leave a mark —perhaps even a scar— on the viewer.

One of the first pieces one sees upon entering the gallery is Schwegler's seven-piece photographic series, "My Struggle." From left to right, we see a headshot of the artist as she is transformed from a slightly distressed state to someone soiled, bloodied, missing a tooth, and in extreme anguish. This portrait of progressive (self)destruction reminds me of people I see on a daily basis at the rural convenience store near my home. There's the tweakers, their wild gestures an exhibition of self-assurance from inside raging, scabbed heads. Less frequently, and considerably more subdued and cleaned up, are the victims of chronic domestic abuse. If Schwegler intends to portray the state of mind for either, or merely suggest that her individual struggle with some other issue is equally dark, this is a humorless piece indeed. It is only by imagining that she did not actually knock her left lateral incisor out we are allowed some distance.

Further relief for the viewer might be found in the nearby sculpture, “Passing Resemblance II.” Apart from the hands and head, which are silicon replicas of Schwegler’s own in a 1:1 scale, the overall size of this piece is that of large doll. I usually would be disinclined to speak to Schwegler’s real-world small frame, for physical characteristics are often incidental at best to an artist’s output; however, she seems to be using her physique to emphasize the hands and head as a priority for an artist.



Heidi Schwegler, “Passing Resemblance II”/The Art Gym

It’s a smart piece, and judging from the number of phone photos taken at the opening reception, “Passing Resemblance II” was the

popular centerpiece of the exhibit. Quite often I caught three or four people standing around the doll, eyes fixed on it as they conversed. It was not dissimilar to family gatherings in the living room in which the newest child is placed in the middle of the floor for assessment, and as distraction during lulls, even though there isn't much about this piece that would make one engage in some coochy-coochy-coo.

There are a few sculptures of heads in this exhibit, all separated from a body, yet this is not to say that other parts of the anatomy are not represented as well, just more disguised. I am thinking of particular pieces: "Popular Delusion I & II," respectively, a mattress made of birch plywood and a bedspread dipped in a concrete slurry; placed nearby are "Separation Anxiety 4 & 5," which are cast concrete and glass pillows. One might say these speak of the heart, and rather straightforwardly so, yet what takes these rather staid objects into a much darker emotional realm (a good curatorial move) is their proximity to yet another piece, "Fade to Black," a set of black-flocked and bird-shot-splattered Venetian blinds mounted in a window. (Maybe "My Struggle" doesn't reference methamphetamine after all.) Schwegler employs flocking for a number of pieces in this exhibit, and toward different ends than for "Fade to Black." In competition with "Passing Resemblance II" for attention is her "Till the Next Time I See You," a flocked, rather steampunk-looking Elmo doll. The toy's legs are reminiscent of prosthetics, and in this, one can imagine a need for a healing re-plushing to make it seem whole again.



Heidi Schwegler, "Till the Next Time I See You"/The Art Gym

Am I empathizing with a doll? We can anthropomorphize this Elmo, but is he plucky against all odds or screaming in agony? In a way it does recall "Resemblance" as both seem innocent enough were it not for something "not quite right."

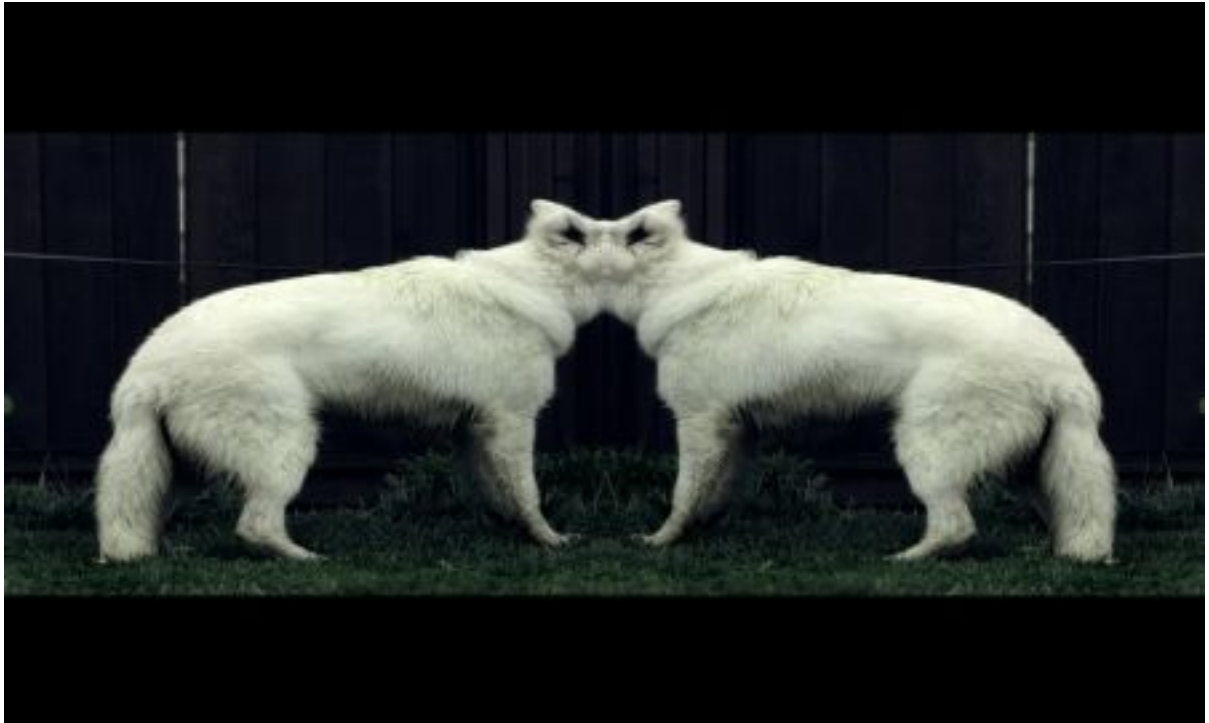
The other flocked pieces take another, slightly different tangent. First, a portion of the most visually complex sculpture in the show, “Soft Crush,” has flocking on the seat of a chair. The back of the chair is missing. Underneath and squished by the chair is an exercise ball wrapped in plaster bandages like those used for casting a broken limb. The chair and the ball are tied together by a length of rope. I have seen people use these large plastic balls as chairs, presumably to improve their posture, but this one is evidently broken, as is the chair. And the decision to meld the two as some sort of utilitarian remedy? Perhaps, yet from the front, the way the deflated ball is cinched in the middle rather reminds me of a pair of testicles. “Soft Crush?” Now, that’s funny!

Other flocked pieces include a bent kiddie pool (“Transient Dimming”), a dented laundry basket (“Perversion of Etiquette”), and a twisted electric cord (“Strangled with the Entrails”). The flocking serves to give these broken and presumably discarded items a new use—and as we can determine from the titles—a decidedly aesthetic one.

Schwegler uses a similar strategy of quasi-revitalization when she puts a coat of paint on a shot-up gerry can and bent crowbar, and dips the aforementioned bedspread in concrete. It could be argued her cast aluminum torn-up cardboard box and caved-in steering wheel are made with a similar intention, which brings us full circle to the “Separation Anxiety” pillows, the difference being the pillows are read as more personal, as if they were removed from her own bed instead of found. Not that the domestic and the worldly, or the intimate and the derelict do not share parallels, especially when in the hands of an artist. In Schwegler’s case, it may be making the best of a fucked-up situation, even if the futility can only be candy-coated.

We can contrast all that has gone before with another piece, “Dead Inside,” a black, 6-foot high chain link cage with an automated gate that opens and closes at a fairly quick interval. A rather simple affair, it depends on little else than someone to mosey inside to see potential for additional reads. At one point during the opening for this show, a middle-aged man stood alone inside; at another time, two very young

girls played within its confines. I will leave it to the viewer to interpret as she sees fit.



Heidi Schwegler, "Gray Out"/The Art Gym

This is the third time in three years I have written about Schwegler. The other two times were to give a paragraph to specific pieces. One mention was for "Wrest," a short video now on view in "Botched," in which Schwegler wears a little black dress while trying to break free from an assailant who is green-screened out and therefore somewhat invisible. It is both disturbing and beautiful to watch, as is another video, "Gray Out" (a collaboration with the Brooklyn artist, Jason Loeffler). A split screen shows a mirror image of a large white dog on a tether lunging forward. The head of "each" dog is lost into the head of the other so that we cannot see the eyes, noses or mouths. It is as if that portion of the other is already consumed. Like ruminations that keep us tossing and turning all night, the looped video has the dogs caught in a stalemate.

By now one might be asking, "So, where is this humor you mentioned?" Well, the chair piece. Elmo is pretty funny, but in a sad way as he smiles and waves to passersby despite the fur having been removed from his legs. If "Passing Resemblance" gets a laugh, it is the

nervous type of chuckle at the intentional deformities. Schwegler's clown heads, "Slipping Underwater" and "Juggernaut," may get a smirk as we slightly shake our heads at the violence of the pieces. Not so much humor after all, it seems. So what is it, exactly, that we feel as we move about the gallery?

I cannot presume to speak for others, and no doubt gender plays a significant role in interpretation as well, but outrage and fear come to mind, as does a pervasive sadness about a host of emotional and social issues. As I approach the work from my own history of working in emergency rooms, intensive care units and psychiatric wards, I am predisposed to look for the neutralizing laugh. I am not oblivious; yet my smile, chuckle or laugh provide a needed distance, a learned emotional break lest my compassion completely fry.

Perhaps I am not alone in this response, for similarly, an artist must stand outside of herself—a survival mechanism in itself—to fabricate an object that *reflects* the intensity of her thoughts and feelings about her subject matter. Schwegler steps up to the line of the maudlin, macabre, or even the horrific, and then lessens the jolt as art. If she were to take herself too seriously (think of the person who overshares emotional turmoil on social media), the temptation might be for us to otherwise avoid this display.

Instead, Schwegler lets us walk away with a feeling for a story behind each sculpture—rarely happy, mind you—but happily one in which the artist has had the good grace to pretty up some for us while still having the desired impact.

Note:

Heidi Schwegler teaches at the Oregon School for Arts and Crafts. While standing with a friend in front of her "Passing Resemblance II," a young woman approached us and introduced herself as one of Schwegler's graduate students. During the ensuing conversation she offered that she saw Heidi as an admixture of fragility and fierceness. Apt.