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Escape to small fantasy worlds at these three Houston gallery shows

Recent works by Michael Velliquette, Julia Kunin and Rachel Cox deserve close inspection



Molly Glentzer | December 4, 2020 Updated: December 7, 2020, 12:18 pm



"Rainbow Dream Machine" is the title work in Julia Kunin's first solo show of ceramics at McClain Gallery.

'Rainbow Dream Machine'

Julia Kunin's totemic clay friezes can be perceived as surreal bodies, organic-mechanical structures, elaborate keyholes or utopian architecture, but their robust aesthetic is aggressively handmade – like something that would have been crafted in the dizzy 1960s or 1970s, with ample evidence of the artist's touch. Rough-edged but also made spectacular with iridescent luster glazes, each is composed of multiple, closely stacked and slightly interlocking organic shapes.

Assembled, they create abstracted warrior figures, mostly female although some have multiple genders. Weaponry is built into their breasts and pelvises, which also form eyes. With their “walled” outlines and crevices, the combined segments also resemble floor plans for buildings where secret ceremonies could take place. “You can imagine looking down at them from a birds-eye view and seeing different chambers, each with a symbol about vision, listening or awareness,” Kunin suggests in a video.

Just six of the works hang in McClain Gallery’s smaller space, as if forming a socially-distanced procession. The series is inspired by ancient Roman caryatids, the sculpted female figures created as columns for temples. But Kunin’s proprietary, rainbow-hued glazes come from Hungary, and frequent visits there (including a Fulbright Scholarship) have enriched her appreciation of Bauhaus, Art Nouveau and mid-century Hungarian art.

Some of the segments hold odes to those influences. In the title piece, “Rainbow Dream Machine,” a curvy shape pays homage to Hungarian-American industrial designer Eva Zeisel’s Belly Button Vase, a wrench form echoes Socialist-era public art, and organic patterns suggest Aubrey Beardsley’s Art Nouveau drawings. The entire form of the piece “Labrys Queen” suggests one of the robotic-costumed dancers of Oskar Schlemmer’s “The Triadic Ballet.”

Kunin’s shapes complement the gallery’s larger Bo Joseph exhibition, where new wall reliefs reflect ideas from large mixed-media paintings layered with symbols of mythological and human warfare.

Through Feb. 13, McClain Gallery, 2242 Richmond; 713-520-9988, mcclaingallery.com