

Derosia

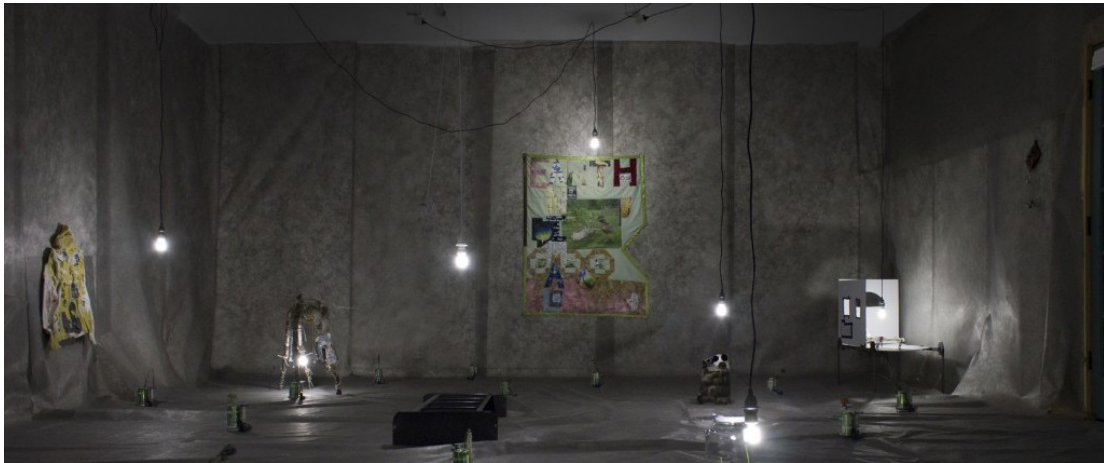
Jackie Im, Art Practical, May 5, 2015



ART PRACTICAL

Review

100° City



When I was a child, I remember having distinct feelings of anxiety about the environment. Coming of age during the time of *Captain Planet*, *Ferngully*, and the vaguely environmental video for Paula Abdul's "Promise of a New Day," the stomach-churning sense of fear and a realization that, as a child, I couldn't do much to halt or reverse the effects of pollution is a sentiment that persists today. Of course, as an adult, those feeling are mixed with a kind of fatalism as the Earth hurdles toward some end. The drought in California is not helping. The calamitous blizzards on the East Coast aren't helping either.

Such environmental anxieties pervade *100° City*, a three-person exhibition by Jason Benson, Joel Dean, and Erin Jane Nelson at City Limits in Oakland. Entering the foyer of the gallery, you see the gallery's windows and glass doors covered with black plastic and taped down with blue painter's tape, looking like the exterior of a haunted house. The walls and floor of the gallery are lined with gray, papery fabric, veined in a way that reminded me both of the red weed that plagues Earth in Steven Spielberg's telling of *The War of the Worlds* (2005) and of varicose veins. The immersive installation made the normally sunny gallery space feel dank and alien, disrupting the common gallery tropes of the white cube and the more recent

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Joel Dean. *Untitled*, 2015; Solarbotics Photopopper Photovore V5.0, glass jar; 11" x 7" x 7". Courtesy of the Artist and City Limits, Oakland.

Contemporary Art Daily chic of bright, even lighting. With a keen sense of display and through the works themselves, Benson, Dean, and Nelson have created an exhibition that prods at humanity's place on Earth, what comes next, and what does "next" look like? "Will sinkholes form?"

Coke Life cans teeter slowly around the gallery floor, flowers sprouting from their pull-tab mouths. Joel Dean's *Earthlings* (2015) pieces operate on oblong wheels with battery-powered robotics desperately trying to move them forward. Playing on our human knack for personifying all things, Dean shrewdly casts these

sculptures as cute, almost reminiscent of Wall-E, yet in calling them "earthlings," there's something disturbing in these Coke Life cans: a corporate cooption of natural and organic foodstuffs being left behind as humanity passes. There is a moment in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* where the man and his son savor a can of Coca-Cola, an act that is so mundane yet harmful to our health, and in this dystopia provides a kind of normalcy for the father, a reminder of a past life. These gestures of normalcy are present in Dean's untitled sculpture made of a glass jar containing two tiny machine-looking creatures powered by solar energy and equipped with light-sensing "eyes," as well as sensors to help them avoid obstacles. Displayed as one would a bug in a jar, the robotic beings have leaves to munch on and holes to breathe fresh air from. It's an eerie proposal: If insects die out, will we treat and care for robots in the same way?

Jason Benson's sculptures are decidedly creepier and horrific. His masked creatures take on alien forms, but come emblazoned with hockey masks, a cue that reads them as human and also strongly referencing Jason Voorhees from the Friday the 13th horror series. Like the famous masked antagonist, these sculptures seem reanimated, stiff yet relentless. An untitled piece, with deer-like legs made of pipes, is coiled in wire and bungee cord, a Frankenstein-like animal brought back to life via technology. Another sculpture sits in an open cardboard box, clad in plaster with a light fixture jutting out of its chest like the creature in *Alien* (1979). The piece is crudely made—it's ugly and creepy, plaster is spread unevenly, with rough-hewed, hooked appendages flanking either side—but it all serves to underscore an exploration of bodies, mutation, and death. Pasted on a flap of the cardboard box, a text reads, "The year of the death penalty," while the sculpture also sports a dog tag stating, "Welcome to Earth, the epicenter of abject cruelty." It's a damning sentiment that speaks to humans' ability to cause harm to others, to animals, to the environment.

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Erin Jane Nelson. *How Acidic Is Your Body?*, 2015 (detail); cable-knit sweater, inkjet print on cotton, beeswax, spirulina tablets, almonds, embroidered patch; 30" x 23" x 3". Courtesy of the Artist and City Limits, Oakland.

In *How Acidic Is Your Body?* (2015), Erin Jane Nelson mines the anxiety of toxicity and deficiency. Nelson fixes and stiffens an oatmeal-colored knit sweater with sloppy pools of dried beeswax. Undermining its coziness, she points to first-world consumers' interest in a more natural lifestyle—the Goop lifestyle, if you will. Stuck to the sweater are almonds, a nutritionally dense food, and there are spirulina tablets, a dietary supplement that is high in amino acids. There is also the clipping of a fear-mongering quiz asking “How acidic is your body?” and a lifehack suggesting the use of tampons to check for leaking sewage. Bringing these elements together, Nelson prods at the kind of manipulative clickbait that gets people to blindly follow a lifestyle brand without thought of the ramifications.

In the quilt piece *Earth Animal* (2015), Nelson stitches on a print of a flier that reads, “Art won’t save the world.” Couple that sentiment with studies of the human impact on the planet and it seems clear that humans can’t—and won’t, either. While fatalistic, *100° City* is not a wholly ominous show. There is a black, absurd humor that pervades, pointing at our

foibles, where humans are hypocritical and where we perhaps foolishly try to save ourselves. The show is not easy to view: Works are either on the floor or hung low, forcing you to stoop down, to become base. The press release, written by Dean and Nelson, is a poetic list of questions that both illuminates and obfuscates subject matters: “Will sinkholes form,” “Did Phyllis hang herself,” “Is brown the new green,” and so on. *100° City* seeks to challenge, to draw people into these messy conversations about anxiety, about the effects we have on the Earth and our powerlessness to effect change.

100° City is on view at City Limits, in Oakland, through May 9, 2015.