



Imagery of manhole covers riffs on fears lurking - San Francisco Chronicle (CA) - May 14, 2011 - page E1

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Bay Area collaborators Jeanne C. Finley and John Muse have a new video showing at Patricia Sweetow. It entwines documentary imagery and fictive voice-over narration to create a 12 1/2-minute urban infrastructure suspense film.

The title, "Manhole 452," faintly echoes "Fahrenheit 451," and even more faintly, but not irrelevantly, "Fahrenheit 9/11."

The 1966 movie that François Truffaut based on a Ray Bradbury novel sounded alarms about the sort of conflagration - of wisdom, humanity and pleasure in life - to which mass conformity can lead. Michael Moore annexed its sinister overtones when he titled his 2004 docu-diatribes against the Bush administration's cynical abuse of power.

Finley and Muse marshal these associations and more, though their narrator accounts for the title by noting - accurately? who knows? - that 452 manholes punctuate San Francisco's Geary Boulevard.

Images of steam, and later flames, shooting from manholes, and of a manhole cover quaking noisily in midstreet like the cover of a pot on the boil, lend power to the ambiguous voice-over. It mixes ostensible facts with insinuations that the speaker may have suffered a disabling injury from an underground explosion.

The viewer begins to taste his fear as news-channel soundtrack and surveillance footage of gushers from below ground concoct a bad dream of mishap by infrastructure failure or, perhaps, terrorism.

As in some of their earlier video work, Finley and Muse construct a darkly lyrical hybrid of rumination and documentation, so slightly tinted with humor as to leave viewers wondering whether they perceive it or imagine it.

A hanging series of angry orbs on vellum fleshes out Finley and Muse's show: charcoal rubbings of manhole covers from the San Francisco streets.

Sweetow also presents new paintings - what else to call them? - by Jamie Vasta that owe their luminosity to her consistent use of colored glitter.

Beginning by photographing her friends posing, Vasta has loosely re-created some of Caravaggio's most famous pictures. Because the glitter she glues on panels will not flow, Vasta has to map their surfaces and apply colors inch by inch to form a sort of micro-mosaic.

Like the work of so many contemporary painters, Vasta's effort results most memorably in her positioning herself in her art's history. Still, the complexity that her new work maintains in mingling high-art sources with low-art materials gives it an unexpected, though I suspect short-lived, fascination.

Eye-popping Murata: Takeshi Murata also has a show anchored by a strangely entrancing new video at Ratio 3.

After learning that the copyright on Popeye the Sailor had expired in Europe, Murata created his own computer-animated version, bafflingly titled "Get Your Ass to Mars" (2011).

In it Popeye, as Murata rendered him from memory, falls asleep at his job canning green goo labeled "spinach," gets fired, then threatened with eviction by his landlord, Wimpy. After sitting with a gravely ill Bluto, Popeye visits Olive Oyl's grave, goes on a spinach-induced rampage in his apartment and hangs himself.

A posthumous epilogue has him driving a gold-plated hot rod into an abstract sunset of flash animation.

Behind the projected video's diverting absurdity may lurk some glum symbolism of American decline, but it cannot steal the show.

In the gallery's larger room, Murata displays computer-synthesized photos: still lifes such as "Art and the Future" (2011) that let us look unhurriedly into the eerily smooth dimension of "Get Your Ass to Mars," where not even past, present or future seem to keep their places.

Jeanne C. Finley and John Muse: Manhole 452: Video and drawings.

Jamie Vasta: After Caravaggio: Paintings. Through May 28. Patricia Sweetow Gallery, 77 Geary St., S.F. (415) 788-5126. www.patriciasweetowgallery.com.

Takeshi Murata: Get Your Ass to Mars: Video and photographs. Through June 11. Ratio 3, 1447 Stevenson St., S.F. (415) 821-3371. www.ratio3.org.

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