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Detail of Rosha Yaghmai's "of other places," 2013. (Yongho Kim)

Review: Visions by Anna Mayer and Rosha yaghmai lightly collide

- Sharon Mizota

In the first of a series of collaborative exhibitions at Commonwealth & Council, Anna Mayer and Rosha Yaghmai were inspired by the diaries of the 19th century Swiss explorer and writer, Isabelle Eberhardt.

Born in 1877, Eberhardt flaunted convention by traveling and living in North Africa, where she converted to Islam and dressed as a man. She died no less spectacularly in a flash flood at the age of 27.

Mayer and Yaghmai are less concerned with the fascinating details of Eberhardt's life, however, than with the principles it embodied: a hunger for direct experience and a disregard for conventional boundaries. Featuring mostly sculptural works, the show is less a traditional collaboration than an intersection of two visions that lightly touch

Yaghmai's work is the more cohesive and intellectually engaging, speaking to the peripatetic nature of Eberhardt's life by doing its own "traveling." The artist sent containers of putty to people all over the world, asking them to make an impression of whatever they wished and send it back to her.

The result is a table full of curious, lumpy, blue-green objects: teeth, leaves, rocky protuberances, even a whole face. Like postcards, they are literally impressions from afar, each representing a particular moment of engagement between a singular person and the physical world.

A series of drawings traverses more mental territory. Yaghmai drew a copy of a postcard of an Alaskan coastal scene and then drew a copy of the copy, repeating this process an extra 28 times.

Subsequent versions grow both more murky and oddly more detailed, as Yaghmai recalled aspects of the original and added them to her copies. The work is poignant evidence of the constant interplay between being in the moment and the long decay of memory.

Mayer's contributions are more diffuse. There's a gangly wall sculpture that resembles a bottle tree, decorated with various found and sculpted objects that seem to have some personal significance. Bottle trees are said to capture evil spirits, but Mayer's version seems more like a charm bracelet.

More intriguing is a long, black ceramic pipe (for smoking, not plumbing) that loops around on itself to form a circle. It is inscribed with the phrase, "YOU CANNOT SEE IT; BUT YOU CAN UNDERSTAND HOW I AM BOTH INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THESE STRUCTURES." The idea of being both an insider and an outsider, as Eberhardt must have been, pairs nicely with the hollow, circular pipe. As smoke and breath move from inside to the outside, they transcend, but do not erase, the distinction between the two.

Mayer also explores this notion of transcendence a bit more directly in a life-size, resin sculpture of a hand.

At first it seems that nothing is amiss, but closer inspection reveals slightly odd shifts in texture and thickness among the fingers. As it turns out, each digit is cast from a different person. It's an eerie, deformed, but charming invocation of the notion that we are all indeed connected under the skin.

Commonwealth & Council, 3006 W. 7th St., #220, (213) 703-9077, through Oct. 26. Closed Sundays through Tuesdays.
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