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Going Out Guide

Art review: 'Jeanne Silverthorne: Vanitas'

By Michael O'Sullivan

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Since 2009, the Phillips Collection's ongoing series of "Intersections" installations has opened a dialogue between works by contemporary artists and older works from the museum's collection. Occasionally, those conversations burrow into the building's architecture as well, as in the case of "One Day, After the Rain," a temporary mural inspired by Arthur Dove's landscapes that artist Sandra Cinto has wrapped around the museum's tiny Tryst cafe.

The latest "Intersections" show is, at least superficially, straightforward. Located in the original Phillips house, "Jeanne Silverthorne: Vanitas!" juxtaposes 13 paintings from the museum's vaults with 15 of Silverthorne's silicone rubber sculptures. The paintings range from still-life master Jean-Baptiste Simeon Chardin's 1728 "A Bowl of Plums" to 1956's "Bird," a highly stylized representation of flight by Cubist pioneer Georges Braque.

Four of Silverthorne's pieces riff whimsically on the tradition of the floral still life. "Phosphorescent Pink With Flies," "Dandelion Clock," "O Rose" and "Poppies" all depict fat, rubber flowers bursting out of black rubber picture frames like 3-D paintings. True to the spirit of the vanitas genre, which emphasizes the transience of beauty and the inevitability of death and decay, Silverthorne's flowers are beset by creepy, crawling insects. ("Vanitas" is the Latin word for vanity and relates to the biblical admonition that "all is vanity.")

Other works by Silverthorne relate less literally to the Phillips paintings. The titular insect of her “Moth and Bulb,” for example, hovers very near Braque’s “Bird,” in an evocation of flight. But the bug is doomed; he’s heading straight for a light bulb.

In other cases, Silverthorne merely plays off a particular shape: Painter Henri Rousseau’s “The Pink Candle” relates both to Silverthorne’s “Long Fuse” and “Short Fuse,” which feature candlelike sticks of dynamite, and to her “DNA Candelabra,” an elaborate installation that includes double-helix-shaped tapers.

Dynamite, for obvious reasons, is associated with destruction and death. But what does DNA have to do with vanitas? According to the subtitle of Silverthorne’s candelabra piece, the work depicts the genetic code that’s associated with a predisposition for “anxiety, addiction, anger and panic.”

Those will take a few years off your life.

At first glance, Silverthorne’s “Task Chair” — a life-size model, in rubber, of a swivel chair — seems to have little to do with any of the paintings, visually or conceptually, let alone with the idea of vanitas. It’s positioned between two paintings: Milton Avery’s “Pink Still Life,” featuring a pipe, matches and a liquor bottle; and Pierre Bonnard’s “Bowl of Cherries.”

The artist explains that the chair, which is modeled on a piece of furniture she owns and uses, represents the studio, or, as she puts it, “a place of entropy and loss.” That’s funny; I always thought of the studio as a place of birth and creativity. Isn’t it museums, as philosopher Alan Watts once observed, where art goes to die?

Perhaps that’s Silverthorne’s point. Maybe the very act of artmaking is a futile albeit beautiful gesture of resistance against death. One of the qualities of rubber that appeals to the artist is what she calls the material’s “deliquescence.”

In other words, unlike marble sculpture — but much like human flesh — it melts. It's not by accident that the little rubber crates featured in "Jeanne Up and Down," a piece that includes two doll-size self-portraits of the artist, look like coffins.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORK

The somber undertones of Jeanne Silverthorne "Vanitas!" are balanced by the work's sense of humor. A lot of that comes from the artist's choice of material. Rubber flops and jiggles. It's, well, rubbery.

Silverthorne has been working with rubber since the mid-1980s, but it was only relatively recently that she found a kind of rubber, platinum silicone, that doesn't discolor or crack like earlier forms of latex. True to its brand name, SORTA-Clear, the uncured rubber is murky. (For a sense of what it looks like before pigment is added, see the "ice" in Silverthorne's sculpture "Frozen Dandelions.")

Isn't it a little ironic that Silverthorne has finally settled on a medium in which to express her central theme — impermanence — that is, at least theoretically, permanent? Maybe, says the artist, who adds that she'd rather keep the idea of disintegration in the realm of metaphor, "and not a literal thing."