

Lenka Clayton

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What's America's 'State of the Art'?

This show wants to tell you

By Barbara Schreiber

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SF

248 Utah Street
SF, CA 94103
+ 415 399 1439

NY

313 W 14th Street 2F
New York, NY
By appointment only

WEB

www.cclarkgallery.com



"Drawing E. Obsoleta," 2011, by Jeff Whetstone – 16mm film transferred to digital video. – Courtesy of Julie Saul Gallery

With its immense variety and accessibility, "State of the Art: Discovering American Art Now" aims to please. This may sound like a recipe for blandness, but not to worry – the show succeeds.

"State of the Art" originated at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, in Bentonville, Arkansas. It was a sprawling 100+-artist show, the result of curators visiting more than 1,000 studios to find high-quality, audience-friendly art. Now it has been split into two touring versions.

Walk in, and you are greeted by three video portraits from Susie J. Lee's "Fracking Fields" series. By asking men working in North Dakota's Bakken oilfield to stare into the camera as long as possible, Lee has created jarringly intimate portraits – a brash, handsome man who gazes deep into your eyes, flanked by stoic and restless ones. The placement of "Fracking Fields" at the start of the show signals the curators' intentions – to break down barriers between viewer and art.

Some of the exhibition's most compelling works are rooted in personal experience.

Michael Menchaca and Teri Greeves meld the traditional and contemporary to explore their cultural heritage. Menchaca brings together the comic book and the pre-Columbian codex in works that address immigrant issues, while Greeves' beaded high-heeled sneakers include Native American imagery co-opted by modern artists.

Angela Drakeford's "Self-Portrait II," a panel crammed with black paper flowers, is a distillation of her childhood experience of being labeled too white for her neighborhood and too black for her school.

Angela Ellsworth expresses conflicts about her Mormon upbringing through bonnets studded with corsage pins – beautiful objects that pierce the flesh.

Bob Trotman has long mined the corporate world, which his family expected him to enter, for inspiration. On view here are two motion-activated sculptures – "Waiter," an impatient hand with a tapping finger, and "Trumpeter," a horn-headed businessman issuing a stream of blather. Standing between them, you hear the music of mindless babble, the beat kept by a disapproving finger.

Lenka Clayton's funny, unnerving works bring together the need to create and the need to protect. "63 Objects Taken from My Son's Mouth" is just that – a stately arrangement of pennies, a cigarette butt, a bottle cap and other allurements. In the video series "The Distance I Can Be from My Son," her toddler wanders briefly in a park, grocery store and alley before Clayton is compelled to rescue him.

There is more good work here than can be discussed in a brief review. But here are a few other noteworthy pieces.

In their "Geolocation" series, Nate Larson and Marni Shindelman find poignancy beneath the shallowness of social media. Using the geolocation information embedded in tweets, they visit and photograph the locations, then pair them with the tweets, resulting in odd narrative fragments.

In his film “Drawing E. Obsoleta,” Jeff Whetstone tries to draw the landscape by using a snake as his line. With a stick, he attempts to move the snake, which keeps wriggling away. Absurd and deep, this is a wonderful commentary on the futility of controlling nature.

David Greber’s “Stilllives II,” a video projection on the museum floor, is a disorienting collage of activity shot from above – hands smoothing out textiles, household items thrown or scattered and pets walking across the resultant mess. In this picture of cheery home life going off the rails, stimuli come at us fast and undifferentiated.

The audience favorite in “State of the Art,” Jonathan Schipper’s “Slow Room” has already received extensive coverage.

[\[READ MORE: ‘Slow Room’ as performance\]](#)

In this dowdy faux living room, every piece of furniture and doodad is attached to a cable and slowly pulled toward a hole in the wall by a motorized winch. After just a few weeks, there is already an entertaining, disconcerting mess of toppled furniture and buckled flooring.

In the midst of so much theatricality, subtle work may be overlooked. But there is much here worth contemplating. For example, Zoë Charlton’s “Dreamers and Builders,” a gouache and collage on paper, looks pastoral at first glance, but packs an emotional wallop in its depiction of naked men who carry trees and other physical and metaphorical burdens on their backs.

“State of the Art” has myriad ways to engage viewers – extensive wall texts and graphics, a catalog that doubles as a card game, social media aspects, and more. But they are relatively unobtrusive, so if you want the old-fashioned experience of looking at art on your and its own terms, you can do so with minimal interference.