

Julie Heffernan
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HYPERALLERGIC

An Abandoned Cubicle Complex Filled with Art

By Sharon Adarlo June 23, 2014

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By appointment only

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NEWARK, NJ — I've been to so many art gallery shows in the New York City area that they start to blur. Why does everything look the same? To echo a *New York Magazine* piece by Jerry Saltz from last week on the uniformity of contemporary abstract art, too many artists and galleries seem to be playing it safe by putting out pieces that are too neat, too sanitized, and blandly marketable. Perfect art for that hotel lobby.

But the latest show in the Gateway Project, a series of pop-up group exhibitions in downtown Newark, NJ, put a jolt in my step. Through the Looking Glass takes its theme from Lewis Carroll's story of the same name and delves into ideas about parallel identities, mirroring, reflection, and concepts of the self. It's an invigorating, joyful, and an exhilarating collision of mediums, styles, and artists.



Julie Heffernan, "Self-Portrait at Gatherer" (2013), 68 x 66 in (courtesy the Gateway Project)

The Gateway Project is a collaboration between Rebecca Jampol of [Solo\(s\) Project House](#), an art gallery and studio spaces in Newark, and Jasmine Wahi and Meenakshi Thirukode of [Project for Empty Space](#), an organization that utilizes vacant or unusual places for various projects. (Jampol and Wahi curated *Through the Looking Glass*.) The Gateway Project started holding exhibitions late last year in the Gateway Center, a complex of offices next to Newark’s main railway hub, Pennsylvania Station.

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Highlights of the show include two allegorical oil paintings by [Julie Heffernan](#), a Brooklyn artist. “Self Portrait as Gatherer” is a bravura work that depicts the artist carrying a roped net filled with rabbits as dead deer are piled next to her. Behind her a mirror reflects her image and a scene with a Nazi military official, a few more men, and some dead forest animals. It seems we are standing in the same space as the men in the mirror, an intriguing touch. “Self Portrait on the Brink,” shows a silk tent on a raft about to plunge down a waterfall. The setting is a forest that seems to be inspired in equal measure by Dr. Seuss and the great landscape paintings of the 19th century. But instead of a wide open space, the forest is dimly lit, claustrophobic, and menacing.

They are beautiful paintings with rich details and textures, crammed with elements that touch on environmental degradation, consumption, and the destructive impulses of humanity. They’re also shot through with Heffernan’s particular brand of feminine, lusty, and rich surrealism. [Camille Paglia](#) would have a field day with these paintings.

Also of note is Jersey City artist Laura Quattrocchi’s “The Lost Collection,” of gloves, hats, and other personal items that were lost in public spaces by absent-minded pedestrians in and around the New York City area, and then found and catalogued by her. The objects are suspended from the ceiling and tagged with information on where and when they were acquired by the artist. Individually, objects such as a dirty glove may not elicit much of a reaction,

but when assembled together, they become poignant. You are walking through a sea of people, signified by their mundane, lost possessions.

Other standouts of the show include works by Kevin Darmanie, an up-and-coming Newark artist, including a skilled watercolor rendering of black men's faces and an image of a black rod as a symbol of corporal punishment. There's also a stark, black painting of abstracted 2x4s that are thrown together in a complex, geometric structure. What pulls them together is a borrowed YouTube clip of Vybz Kartel, a Jamaican dancehall and reggae artist who's serving a life sentence for the murder of an associate. The video shows Kartel defending skin bleaching as a form of body modification like tattoos or earrings and talking about how it doesn't represent self-hate. "It's about style," he says in the video. Darmanie, a native of Trinidad and Tobago, said he wanted to challenge stereotypes of the happy-go-lucky Caribbean person, and he manages to approach this complex identity issue (and others) without resorting to cliché.

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In a back area of the exhibition space, you will happen upon a darkened room displaying work by South African artist Richard Hart. Directly in front of you is a realistically rendered painting of a black, barechested woman in whiteface that makes her visage look like a skull. On her head are two small skulls and on her shoulders, three pairs of overlapping hands — black hands sandwiched between white ones. A black cloth sits on the floor, festooned with artifacts such as a small bowl, triangle-shaped mirrors, hair, and bones. Spraypainted on the cloth and mirrors are the words, "Bushfire Spirit." The dramatic installation goes beyond the realm of art and into the spooky and macabre, like a voodoo altar, conjuring up ideas related to race, power, miscegenation, sex, magic, and death along the way. What spells can be wrought here? The space vibrates with intensity and darkness. There is power here.

A slight quibble: The exhibition can feel unwieldy and overwhelming. There's so much art packed in that pieces get lost. This is, granted, partly a function of the space's layout, which used to be a cubicle farm: rooms don't flow into each other naturally; there are odd corners and hallways — the bones of a conference room, a printer room, a lunch area, etc. Still, it's reassuring to find curators out there willing to show wonderful art for art's sake. They don't play it safe. Your eyes will never rest.

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Through the Looking Glass continues at the *Gateway II Gallery (Two Gateway Center, 283–299 Market Street, Newark, NJ)* through June 30.

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