



PORTLAND, OREGON'S NEWS WEEKLY. NEWS AND CULTURE FOR MAY 7TH AND BEYOND.

Wednesday, May 7th, 2008

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(Im)material World

Two artists break on through— the fourth wall.

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BY RICHARD SPEER | 503-243-2122

[May 7th, 2008]

"Nature is a haunted house," wrote Emily Dickinson, "but art is a house that tries to be haunted." Art, then, can only approximate nature, showing us an alternate reality, a model of a world we know or wish to know. Today, pivoting between MySpace, online gaming and reality TV, we are seeing with greater clarity that art was the original simulacrum and is still the most elegant. Local wunderkind **Jenene Nagy** and New York City artist **Jane Bruce** demonstrate this with conviction and elan in two thought-provoking shows.

At **Portland Art Museum**, Nagy's *s/plit* is the latest in a series of similar installations themed around the interplay between landscape, the idea of landscape and the artistic representation of landscape. The genre-bending piece features tiny neon triangles grouped together to form directional signs, guiding the eye along the work as it begins as a painting on the wall, then juts into your personal space, becoming sculptural, then climbs the walls and wraps around you, becoming architecture or a stage set, turning you into an actor in Nagy's stage play. The idea that barriers between artistic categories are fluid rather than fixed is not a new one, but Nagy restates it for the cyber age with winning pluck.

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At **Bullseye**, Jane Bruce's *Contained Abstraction* tackles similar issues via a different medium—glass—using the vessel as her point of departure. Bruce is not interested in the vessel; she is interested in *the idea* of a vessel, and so in piece after piece, she starts with jaunty, graphic outlines of a vase, flask and bowl, then switches into meta mode, rejecting the rotundity of three dimensions, willfully flattening these timeless forms into thin rhomboid planes that appear 2D from most angles. She rejects the inherent flash and sheen that is glass' blessing and curse, in favor of a cool, matte finish. With their primary colors, the works exude a Platonic formalism tempered only by the skewed, cartoonish outlines of the über-vessels themselves. Finally, she extrapolates her commentary into the domestic realm in her themes and variations on the façades of houses. Side by side, one atop the other, or separated by handlelike dividers, these glass houses are anything but cozy. They prod us to question, as Dickinson did 150 years ago, why we so desperately need art to haunt the world and simulate the reality we are already living in.

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