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Cindy Phenix
Particles of Abnormality
Embracing Ambiguity and Indulging in the Experience of the Unknown

Nino Mier Gallery
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by Jody Zellen



Particles of Abnormality is an exhibition by Chicago-based Cindy Phenix. In the main gallery space, she bombards viewers with large paintings cluttered with fragmented figures, snippets of buildings and colorful abstract shapes that reference aspects of the natural landscape. In a smaller gallery a few doors down the block, she creates an installation that entices viewers through a labyrinth of monsters painted onto full sheets of drywall. These discrete bodies of work play off and inform each other, almost as if selected figures emerged from the chaos of the paintings, migrated down the block, coming to fruition at human scale on full sheets of drywall.

In the front gallery, Phenix presents dense works that sometimes juxtapose outlined imagery covered with areas of thinly applied as well as thickly impastoed paint. These frenetic pieces invite the eye to dart from here to there across the compositions, never settling in one location. *Conceivable Improvised Perspectives About the Future* (all works 2020), weaves together colorful faces, surreal and unrealistically colored male and female figures and quirky abstract shapes to cover the 96 x 144-inch work. In some ways, it is hard to make sense of what is going on, but that seems to be the point.

The works delight in bringing together random elements culled from a wide range of sources to become an improvised choreography of forms. There is so much to look at in this painting, revealing new elements with every glance. While *Conceivable Improvised Perspectives About the Future* is jam packed, *Fluidity Will End the Apocalypse*, feels unfinished in contrast as Phenix purposely leaves large portions of the linen unpainted. She fills in the delicately drawn outlines with just enough paint to suggest figures and settings. Many of the paintings feel like projected and painted enlargements from sketches and collages created on the computer and blown up so that fine lines become jagged and pixelated. The different elements seamlessly morph from one form and color into another. The effect is unsettling and a bit disorienting.

In a smaller gallery, Phenix has constructed a quasi-maze attaching full sheets of painted drywall and gold-leafed MDF to the base of tall wooden supports that run from the floor to the

ceiling. Within each vertical 8 x 4-foot drywall panel, Phenix depicts a flatly painted, larger than life figure that is part human, part monster and appears to be trapped within the confines of the frame. These gestural works confront the viewer head on yet are neither threatening nor inviting. While they seem to reach out, they cannot escape from the confines of their frames. And because Phenix has constructed a tight maze through which to view them, in some ways they become like images in fun-house mirrors, reflecting fragmented and disembodied representations of the self.

In works like *The Inexplicableness of Strangeness*, *Struggle and Persist* and *Both Real and Artificial*, disjointed amoeba-like shapes come together as if remnants from a dream that one struggles to reconstruct upon waking, but never fully coalesce. These hybrid figures are juxtaposed with delicate gold-leaf abstractions— panels filled with irregularly shaped cut-outs with titles like *A Collection of Preciousness*, *Own Destruction* and *Proper Ending*, that suggest their surfaces have been excised or melted away. The contrast is a bit jarring, calling attention to Phenix's use of materials and process of de-construction and re-combination.

Because of the small size of the space and the way the works are positioned, it is impossible to see more than a few at once. To do so, it is necessary to criss-cross the maze moving around the panels to try and take in the full installation. Viewing these sparser panels in a claustrophobic space is diametrically opposed to the experience of viewing the denser paintings surrounded by white walls in the larger gallery. In some ways, the maze-like installation becomes a physical manifestation of the denser paintings, placing the viewer directly inside the works. Together, what Phenix's installations say to each other and ask of us the audience, is to embrace ambiguity and indulge in the experience and delight of the unknown: a positive message of hope in these isolating and unsettling times.

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