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Stuff

The sculptures of Lynn Aldrich, the paintings of Dennis Hollingsworth and the puppets of Anaphoria

By Doug Harvey

While all the city is agog over Frank Gehry, a more intimate take on the Home-Depot-as-muse sensibility is on view at the Carl Berg Gallery, the new mid-Wilshire space that brings Irvine Fine Arts Center director Berg's strong curatorial eye and advocacy of mid-career artists to a somewhat more accessible venue. There, half a block east of the Petersen Automotive Museum, Lynn Aldrich — one of the most under-recognized sculptors in L.A. — has assembled a sensational group of recent work for "Research and Development," her first solo gallery show since 1999.

Aldrich's work is most related to that of the don of under-recognized L.A. sculptors, Tim Hawkinson, in its poetic transformation of found/appropriated everyday materials, its tremendous formal inventiveness and its restless eclecticism. In this show alone, the work includes an enormous tunnel of concrete-casting cylinders lined with a spectrum of fun fur, several of her signature recontextualizations of the garden hose, a couple of her oddball hybrids of Robert Irwin discs with thrift-store lampshades, a lurid Day-Glo diorama of undersea life made from kitchen sponges and scrub pads, a grid of pages from a coffee-table book of the beautiful swimming pools of California with everything but pools and windows masked with gold-leaf paint, a Scotch tape and 200 hues of colored thread installation, and a short stack of ellipses cut from corrugated fiberglass and hung on the wall like a mirror.

All this makes for a highly entertaining first impression: Aldrich's art is enormously generous in terms of humor, color, spatial and textural subtleties, and surprising intellectual twists. But these aren't one-liners. The indeterminacy of pieces like *Serpentarium* — a coiled, inverted cone of garden hoses lined with a forest of protruding twist ties, with a reflective acrylic disc glinting from its darkest recess — pulls the viewer into a deeper engagement. What exactly are the references here? Is this a cross section of a worm's digestive tract? An inside-out Chia Pet? Or is it generated by a less verbal impulse, its formal qualities determined by the nature of the materials and observation of the mechanics of perception? These last ideas, beloved by 1960s Minimalists and Light & Space artists, respectively, add further layers of humor and a depth of art-historical connection to Aldrich's oeuvre.

But it would be a mistake to see her work as parody. Rather, Aldrich (as well as Hawkinson and a handful of other artists) is redressing a schism left by the hubris of Minimalism (or was that the Enlightenment?)—the dualistic split between subjective and objective perceptions, and the arbitrary emphasis on the latter. Somehow, artists became convinced for a time that if you strip away everything that makes an impression on human consciousness (formal pleasure, narrative content, any reference to something other than the quantifiable physical attributes of the material) you would be left with something transcendently "other." Instead we were left with a lot of cranky, boring art (and a few masterpieces) that placed the highest virtue in clinical sterility. But the revelations they offered — think Carl Andre's bricks — while news to some, were just basic design lessons to many artists. Even the best of it, which sought out points of perceptual indeterminacy and locked them down, wasn't essentially different from more generous work mining the same conceptual territory. By teasing such phenomenological puzzles with a sensual extravagance and a theatricality ranging from precious intimacy to cartoon grandeur, these artists reconnect conceptualism with the human body. By opening her practice to materials that already have a history, and treating that history as part and parcel of those materials, Aldrich reinvests her objects with the connotative and associative wealth that never really went away in the first place. It was just locked in a corrugated-aluminum closet with a textbook.

Another underrated artist from the '90s scene in L.A. is painter **Dennis Hollingsworth**, whose sumptuous, topographically convoluted abstractions always look so amazing that their rigorous conceptual underpinnings can be easily overlooked. Not easily enough for Hollingsworth to be lumped with the utterly-devoid-of-conceptual-underpinnings school of L.A. abstract painters, but just enough that you find yourself deeply engrossed in the sheer physicality and sensual detail of the work long before you realize the artist is shuffling the

same deliberately limited repertoire of stock gestures in each canvas. Hollingsworth's current show at Chac Mool derives from his standard methodology — oil paints in a might-as-well-be arbitrary range of colors, applied wet-on-wet in liberal doses using one of a handful of specific techniques — squeegeed, hurled, troweled, carefully built into a prickly anemonelike forms, etc. Various other excavational procedures remodel the paintscape before it dries. But once it dries, that's it. The painting is finished and there's no going back. The programmatic nature of Hollingsworth's practice could be taken a critique of decorative painting or a debunking of the mystique of beauty — feed a set of parameters with enough varied material and voila, pretty as a picture! The problem with this interpretation is that I've seen other painters try the same thing and consistently produce caca. I prefer to look at Hollingsworth's process as a distillation of the conceptual filtering and vocabulary building with which all artists grapple. And the plain gorgeousness of the results suggests that Hollingsworth is simply possessed of a virtuosic visual talent, which he chooses to flaunt by combining improvisational immediacy with a structure as codified as a sonnet.

I always thought that gay drunk hobo Harry Partch (also a noted composer, inventor of new instruments and purveyor of mythological spectacle) should have had as big an influence on contemporary classical music as Stravinsky. Kraig Grady seems to think so too, but rather than campaign for a change in the contemporary musical landscape, Grady simply invented his own. As liaison for the Isle of Anaphoria, a sort of ideal Indonesian atoll apparently populated by an anarcho-syndicalist collective of artists, theater people, experimental musicians and ethnomusicologists, Grady has overseen the dissemination of Anaphorian culture in the L.A. area for just over a decade. This has entailed a broad range of activities including performances and recordings of Anaphoria's droning or percussive traditional music, the voluminous and endlessly fascinating Web site at www.anaphoria.com, and, most recently, a series of shadow plays reenacting Anaphorian mythology.

As a fan of both microtonal music (where instead of 12 tones in an octave you have 24, or 96, or 666 or, if I understand correctly in this case, 12 slightly different tones) and imaginative narrative umbrellas that collect wide-ranging art practices a la the Museum of Jurassic Technology, I was well-prepared to enjoy *Frenzy* at the Royal Threshold at the Norton Simon October 24. The music was amazing, particularly the deep ringing notes of the enormous xylophonelike *Mt. Mesa* instruments — only the most impressive of the homemade instruments used in the performance. It was hard to believe that the complex music — emerging from behind the backlit scrim — was live, partly improvised, without electronic amplification, and performed by the same people handling the puppets backstage. The visuals were almost as impressive, ranging from cut-out puppets similar to the familiar ancient Indonesian variety to swirling optical effects suited to psychedelic light shows of the '60s. The narrative — a sweet mishmash of the kinds of Hindu love stories Joseph Campbell was always spewing — was a little fuzzy in spots, but the fact that much of the dialogue was ad-libbed gave the performance a thrilling improvisational edge.

Afterward, the performers emerged from behind the screen lugging puppets, some instruments and even one of the patched-together light boxes. *Frenzy* finally won me over by the fact that it was so strongly reminiscent of the kind of theater that I encountered in public schools in the 1970s — grant-funded multicultural puppetry performed by DIY hippies that was far stranger than it seemed at the time. It's a form that deserves reviving, and the Shadow Theater of Anaphoria has nailed it — right down to the informal Q&A. The oddest thing is that they only do these performances occasionally and seldom repeat material. The next one's set for the Pacific Asia Museum in May. Mark your calendars now.

Lynn Aldrich | Carl Berg Gallery, 6018 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles | Through November 8

Dennis Hollingsworth | Chac Mool Gallery, 8920 Melrose Ave., West Hollywood | Through November 15