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## STRETCHING NOTIONS OF STILL LIFE A LITTLE TOO FAR: [1]

Sozanski, Edward J. **Philadelphia Inquirer** [Philadelphia, Pa] 15 Mar 1996: 36.

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### ART

Guest curator Julie Courtney chose 10 local artists to demonstrate that nature morte (the French term for still life) can mean more than paintings of floral bouquets or bowls of fruit. Most of the conceptions in the show are quite distant from tradition, and several are clearly over the edge.

For example, Peter Kinney's wall piece is a kind of large-scale drawing made from strands of dead grasses. It's also a literal expression of nature morte, or "dead nature." So are Bill Scanga's pickled fish and frogs - the fish wear tiny scarves, the frogs wear pants.

In fact, the show is more about "dead nature" than still life. Three artists offer photographic representations modified to emphasize how artificial their subjects are. A.p. Gorny's flower photos are studded with rhinestones. Martha Madigan conflates the human body and foliage. Michael Gallagher paints over photographs of works in the museum's collection that depict flowers.

Winifred Lutz's wall installation of tree knots is one of the few pieces with a spark of life. Peering into the knots reveals tiny still lifes inside the wall.

"Nature Morte" suffers from two problems. First, even allowing for the play on "dead nature," it stretches the concept of still life beyond reason. Second, like many Philadelphia theme shows featuring local artists, it looks recycled. When the work in a show is too familiar, one tends not to give it much attention.

The same can be said for the exhibition at **Nexus** called "Photo Works." This group performance by 12 people was put together by Gabriel Martinez, another local photo-artist.

Unlike "Nature Morte," this exhibition lacks a theme or, for that matter, much *raison d'être* of any kind. Martinez appears to have picked photographers he liked; they, in turn, selected the work they would show. Sandy Sorlien, another photographer, tries to tie the whole untidy mass together in an essay, but her effort is so labored it's painful to read.

Denied any conceptual stimulation, we would at least hope to see some fresh work. Eileen Neff's two pieces, which involve combining graphic images with photographs, create a novel sense of personal reflection. They also represent a sharp break with the photo-objects she has been making.

Ruth Thorne-Thomsen's images of statues that seem to be melting are larger and less surreal than previous work. Alida Fish's subtly altered photos of clay life masks represent an ingenious way to make a familiar subject resonate with uncommon power.

Viewers familiar with Emmet Gowin's aerial photos of the American landscape will be drawn to similar landscapes made in the Czech Republic. As in his American series, Gowin demonstrates that environmental deprecations such as strip mines have their own sinister beauty.

\* Museum of American Art, Broad and Cherry Streets. Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sundays. Admission \$5.95 general, \$4.95 senior citizens and students, \$3.95 children under 12. Through April 14. Phone: 215-972-7600.

\* **Nexus**, 137 N. Second St. Hours: noon to 6 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays, noon to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. Through March 24. Phone: 215-629-1103.

**GALLERY JOE.** Siah Armajani approaches art through architecture and the language of structures. Sometimes he expresses his ideas as functional public projects such as the Louis Kahn lecture room at the Samuel Fleisher Art Memorial. Other work, while retaining its characteristic vocabulary, is more conceptual.

The 11 small sculptures Armajani is showing at Gallery Joe fall into the latter category. They are fanciful environments that do not immediately suggest maquettes for large public projects.

Armajani is known for bridges, which is what these pieces are about. In them, he combines various forms such as the truss bridge and the trestle with otherwise incongruous elements such as tiny wooden barrels, beds, tables and clotheslines.

There's a generous dose of whimsy in these sculptures, which seem so structurally tenuous and improbable. Yet they also bring together in a surprisingly harmonious way two contrasting spirits, the industrial and the domestic.

Compositions such as a web-like trestle set on barrels don't make logical sense but they're oddly poetic in purely visual terms. Armajani's large-scale works are characterized by meticulous fabrication and finish, but these pieces exhibit a casual but charming sloppiness.

They are less clearly "architectural" than other things he has done, more about unnatural juxtapositions than codifications of human activity. They make the

viewer think about differences - between inside and outside, for instance. They are delightfully impractical, but all the better for it.

Gallery Joe, 304 Arch St. Hours: Noon to 5:30 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays. Through March 30. Phone: 215-592-7752.

SANDE WEBSTER. Tom Ferris' efforts to develop elemental but familiar symbols for states of existence has reached a new level of reductiveness. In the past, he has made paintings of houses, boats and trees, singly or in combination. The paintings often took the form of fanciful landscapes.

His newest paintings, at Sande Webster Gallery, are of trees only, but any landscape connotation has been eliminated. In these near-monochromatic paintings, the trees are rendered as ghostly apparitions nearly indistinguishable from their backgrounds.

The paintings aren't quite as all-white as they seem from a distance. Ferris has mixed enough pale blue, violet and puce to create the semblance of form, emphasized by a few heavy pencil lines. Yet the forms are insubstantial, more like shadows than three-dimensional objects.

As in the earlier paintings, the trees represent states of mind and experience such as loneliness and mortality. Their voice is somewhat symbolist, but in a very ethereal and painterly way. This kind of reduction may look improvisational, but it usually occurs after a prolonged process of distillation.

Sande Webster Gallery, 2018 Locust St. Hours: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Mondays through Fridays, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturdays. Through March 25. Phone: 215-732-8850.