

'Green Slip,' by Michelle Forsyth



Death and praxis

Michelle Forsyth's presentation of *Incidents* is hardly routine

BY KATIE ANANIA

Michelle Forsyth spent part of her youth living on a 42-foot boat off the coast of Canada, which inspires all manner of imaginary swashbuckling narratives about her dealings with the pirate sea. However, her artist statement for *Routine Incidents*, Forsyth's solo exhibition on view at the

destruction Charleston Heights Arts Center Gallery, paints a decidedly un-pirate-like, claustrophobic picture of the ocean — a picture that materializes all too quickly in her pictures of violent human tragedy and turgid marine life. Forsyth writes that in her early days, when the ocean was rocked by storms, there were no idyllic adventures on deck, but instead only terrifying moments that caused her to turn inward and contemplate the imminent destruction of herself and others. These themes have emerged at the heart of her latest works.

And initially, death becomes them. In "Green Slip," for instance, the gouache-on-watercolor-paper image apprehended is shocking, and yes, wholly disgusting — it's a picture of a person lying prone against some surface (probably the floor), shot through the head. Blood pours over the person's shattered skull and dampens his face, and the agony of the scene is abundantly clear.

The image is fuzzy, though. Get close and you'll notice that the painted image is composed of minuscule cross-hatchings of color, deftly and individually shaded to give the illusion of blood, flesh and cloth. Like a cross-stitched version of Georges Seurat's pointillist landscapes, the colors are lickably delicious when viewed up close by themselves (Forsyth uses a lot of mauves, whites and violets against peachy

colors to create flesh tones), and uncomfortably quasi-cohesive when viewed from afar. Holes are punctured in some of the paintings, undoing the distinction between the picture and its setting.

Throughout the show, whether it's used to make pictures of octopus tentacles or bathroom suicides, this technique is featured again and again ... and we know the effect. If you grew up in the days of selective cable television, it's how you viewed the adult video channels as a child. If you've seen the 2001 film *Waking Life*, it's the way in which director Richard Linklater engineered a visually splendid but narratively bankrupt version of the message: "What you see can be infinitely re-addressed by how it's presented." If you've looked at anything out of Andy Warhol's "Death and Disaster" series, you've witnessed the poverty of this principle at its very, very best.

The images in her disaster pictures, Forsyth says, are cribbed from Internet photos, which mercifully eliminate her need to see these things happen in real time or even see them played out on television. This kind of distance, the lack of context and the almost ritualistic purification of experience through the image, is the real meat and potatoes of Forsyth's practice. She takes theoretical cues from writers like Paul Virilio, who claims that accidents are engineered at the moment of social or technical progress; according to this logic, Henry Ford is not only the author of the automobile, but the author of the car crash. Fragments of Virilio's views on disaster and media are clearly articulated in the compositions of Forsyth's works; her re-structured "mosaics" of disasters allow the viewer to experience these most gut-

wrenching moments of abjection through purely pictorial means — truncated and filtered, certainly, but no less disturbing.

Also on view in this show are several of Forsyth's "clusters" — spiky shapes produced by sealing 300-pound watercolor paper to the surface of anemone-like structures of wood and latex. The same cool shades of Forsyth's palette form geometric patterns on and around the clusters' surfaces. As if to offer a further statement on the phantasmagoric nature of representation, two five-minute video loops play on a screen just outside the gallery, and images of anemone and fish glide over a deceptively smooth surface, forming an interesting formal dialogue between the manipulations of dimension in the video and the depthlessness of the flat-screen television.

Despite its conceptual volleying, the ambitious content of some of Forsyth's more daring works seems to surge ahead of her practice. Her expansive, compelling use of color is mitigated by a lack of adherence to the formal properties that make similar artists' work so compelling. The fracturing of colors in "Octopi 2," for instance, has neither the technically-perfect chill of an Ingrid Calame painting (which might subject grotesque oil and paint stains to the principles of abstraction) nor the rough-hewn impact of a Chuck Close thumbprint portrait (which would use small, unassuming components to make up a deceptively realistic whole). Technical problems aside, however, *Routine Incidents* packs a stiff punch — one that may require a few drinks and a long stay on dry land after it's over. **CL**

Katie Anania is an Assistant at the Las Vegas Art Museum.

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200 South Brush St.
829-6383
Free