

'Botanicals' plants compelling images

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ART

"Dream Botanicals" at the Howard Yezerski Gallery has just enough haunting images among its nocturnal visions to make it a plausible extension of the Institute of Contemporary Art's previous show, "Gothic."

Shifting from "Gothic's" human grotesques to the plant kingdom's seductive incarnations, the artists' works range from surrealist nightmare to romantic fantasy. Some of it, like David Akida's photographs, promotes nature's pure beauty in its most colorful state. Others, like Andrew and Geoffrey Benson's untitled piece, subject it to mad-scientist antics.

Even in the creepiest instances, the artists have managed to achieve their effects without resorting to horrific means. The Benson brothers' sculpture consists of two metal boxes in which what seem to be casts of empty husks are embedded in wax. The piece creates unease, not so much because it resembles a wax museum curiosity, but because of the provocative addition of a copper wire that joins the two containers into an unholy coupling.

The piece looks like a mesmerizing outtake from the film "Children of the Corn." Nothing else in the show does that, but much of it manages to present nature as a dark and not entirely peaceful, bucolic state. Most notable are Lorey Bonante's "Untitled Sleeves" and

Bonante's sunflower-colored wax sleeves extend disembodied from the wall, their cuffs ending in unsettling stiff drips. Harwood-Rubin's tiny, clear flowers, crudely modeled, take to the floor and walls with casual abandon. The result is a gleefully eccentric breakdown between sculpture, relief and paint; and, as a consequence there's a fine sense of nature's own random order that probably could not have been achieved so deftly by more traditional means.

The unconventional methods even extend to Harwood-Rubin's hot-gluing the pieces to their supports, which lends the installation an ephemeral quality, brilliantly echoing the represented forms' own natural state.

Other artists also exploit unconventional ways of working. Randal Thurstan cuts out silhouettes of bugs and plants to create a disorienting, decorative effect: Karen Moss' collage of calligraphy and graphics embodies nostalgic overtones

Marcy Hermansader's evocative drawing, "The Shrine," echoes the cavernous form and sentiment of a small, attached photo of a vine-covered house. And Elaine Spatz-Rabinowitz's delicate painting of flowers suggestively ripped open to reveal its mesh support and the flowers' continuation.

The remaining works, mostly photographs, include some of the show's most striking. Gary Schneider's rich black-and-white photograph, "Leaf," epitomizes the show's theme. A close-up of a dense layer of oak

the interplay of light and materials. It picks out textures with an intensity that then snakes across the piece, plunging at points into transient darkness.

The result is an otherworldly mood. The tone then picks up with Steve Halpern's witty untitled piece, which depicts a twig humorously wrapped in

fabric and shot against an old painting, turning both objects into flat abstraction.

But Amanda Mean's remarkable pictograms are the show's real surprise. Her "Flower Number 23," consisting of a silvery gray single lily, has an extraordinary range of effect. It is composed of transparencies, densities and opaque white shapes produced only by the light hitting a photographic page.

Like Halpern's piece, Mean's hovers on the edge of plausible recognition: "Bright white curved lozenges translate as pistils of a lily, but scale is skewed and the form wavers between two dimensions and a shallow third. The image is overly gigantic, its location indeterminate. The spatial context is closed, artificial and without a tangible horizon.

We seem to be looking at a compressed version of the represented thing. Representation is mingled with abstraction in an unpredictable way, and a shimmering, glimmering of elegance — a created equivalent of its subject — is the stunning result. □

"Dream Botanicals" at the Howard Yezerski Gallery, 11 Newbury St., Boston, through