



Museums

Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro: Are We There Yet?

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Artists explore inner space

By Michael O'Sullivan
 Friday, Dec. 16, 2011



Tony Brown

The latest exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art is ostensibly about space travel. The American debut of Australian

husband-and-wife artists Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro, "Are We There Yet?" includes a site-specific installation built around the life-size figure of an astronaut and a series of works inspired by the 1986 Challenger space shuttle disaster.

Don't be fooled. The couple's art looks inward as much as toward the stars.

The central piece is the one that lends the show its caustic title. Filling an entire gallery on the museum's second floor, it's set up like a space-age bachelor pad, vaguely evoking the final, surreal bedroom scene in "2001: A Space Odyssey." A spacesuited astronaut lies face down on a mattress, next to a nightstand littered with cigarette butts and empty beer and soft drink cans. Circumstantial evidence suggests that the night before was not a good one.

Surrounding this figure, on a reflective gold floor that makes the room look like everything is sitting in an inch of gleaming olive oil, are 10 elegant arrangements of consumer goods, designed to look more like sculptures than store displays: Marlboro cigarettes. Cheerios cereal. Velveeta cheese. Carnation evaporated milk. Nabisco saltines. Utz cheese balls. Chef Boyardee ravioli. Coca-Cola. Bud Light. And Black Box wine in cardboard cartons. It's what the space station larder might look like if NASA shopped at Costco.

Believe it or not, the effect is pretty stunning.

Though it's hardly a diet a nutritionist would approve of, there's some science behind it. Healy and Cordeiro based their shopping list on a daily intake of 3,800 calories and 9.6 cigarettes - multiplied by 520 days. That's one estimate of how long a round-trip voyage to Mars would take. Their calculations allow for some loss due to spoilage and other factors.

What does this have to do with space? Not much, really. The question asked by "Are We There Yet?" has less to do with any "Star Trek"-like final frontier than the limits of sane consumption.

Although meant to resemble a movie set, the installation isn't just breathtaking because of the artful decor. It looks like a crime scene - albeit one that has been tampered with by artists.

Event Information

DETAILS: Dec. 3, 2011-March 11, 2012
INFORMATION: 202-639-1700
Corcoran Gallery of Art
 500 17th St. NW
 Washington, DC

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The rest of the show consists of seven pieces from Healy and Cordeiro's series "Where We've Been, Where We're Going, Why." Based on pixelated video images of the smoke plume created by the breakup of the Challenger, they resemble abstract, vaguely landscape-y paintings - maybe aerial views of a winding river. They're kind of pretty.

They're also made entirely of Lego bricks.

The effect is powerful, hinting, on the one hand, at Challenger astronaut Christa McAuliffe's background as a schoolteacher and, on the other, at the childlike naivete about space travel that evaporated that day.

The title of the series comes from the title of a famous Paul Gauguin painting, "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?" Like Gauguin's late 19th-century masterpiece, Healy and Cordeiro's existential art poses big questions about the condition, fate and aspirations of humanity.

The tone of the show manages to straddle a line between the critical and the hopeful. We may be foolish, Healy and Cordeiro seem to suggest. But as long as we retain the ability - and the curiosity - to take a step back and look at ourselves, we are not doomed.

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