

Filthy Gorgeous

Wanton. In its most common usage—as an adjective—the word suggests immoral or licentious behavior. It can also suggest playfulness or capriciousness, however. As a noun, it can connote a person with either of these characteristics. Curiously, when used to describe a depraved individual, it usually refers to a woman. As a verb, it references a squandering of resources, "especially in pleasure."⁽¹⁾

With Jennifer Vanderpool's sculptural installations it can certainly seem that "nothing succeeds like excess." While her ultra-baroque sensibility offers viewers a surfeit of visual and emotional pleasures, nothing is squandered. Beribboned and bedazzled, Vanderpool's confectionary bouquets emerge from hovering root balls, equally seductive and repulsive. Roses worthy of wedding cakes, peonies, stargazers and calla lilies (to name but a few of the species in Vanderpool's otherworldly garden) emerge from clumps of gorgeously grotesque colored glue decorated with printed ribbons, glass beads, fake moss and craft store birds. Glossy caramel and chocolate glues topped with artificial moss provide a toxin-rich soil that sprouts mutant roses. And while the earth itself appears to defy gravity, the birds in Vanderpool's plastic Eden are earthbound. One appears stuck to a wad of hardened bubblegum enfolding a congealed scoop of hot fudge; another struggles in vain to escape a floating flowerbed of the same substance, evoking a delicious despair.

The seductive dystopia that is *Wanton* invites playful exploration. Meandering through the toxic paradise, visitors have the opportunity to inspect layer upon layer of artifice, alternatively attractive and repulsive. Intimacy provokes alienation. Microscopic details of the hanging plants—in large color photographs—surround the installation, reinforcing this strange dichotomy of intimacy and detachment. The details are revealed through a photographic matrix, mitigating the very sense of closeness they facilitate. To complicate matters further, Vanderpool has screenprinted supergraphic flowers over these photographic prints. And between these layered prints hanging on the walls, she projects a series of entirely virtual domestic structures. Forbidding homes appear in succession, strangely lacking in any obvious access points and without any context of nature or neighborhood. Suddenly, however, after this series of impenetrable buildings, one appears with an opening door. Even as it draws us in though, it offers no promise of domestic comfort. Interiors that are at once excessively decorated with over-the-top floral wallpapers and strangely barren are built as stage sets complete with missing walls. Empty chairs stand in for gallery visitors, as do a series of antique paper dolls—our avatars in this imaginary world. Mirrors abound, inviting us to jump through the looking glass.

Frogs and butterflies tempt interpretation; a ladybug crawls across one of these interiors, confusing the projected space with the space of the projection, connecting the "real" space of the gallery with the virtual reality of the domestic interiors. While one can certainly see the garden itself as a contemporary *vanitas*—and the animals and insects as symbols of fertility, luck, love, and spiritual messengers (the birds),

iconographic interpretation will take us only so far. Wanton offers any number of layers and threads with which viewers can weave their own narratives and, in the process, layer more meanings still into the matrix.

More than twenty years ago, Jeffrey Deitch observed that "in creating a vision of nature, today's artists, unlike their predecessors of previous generations, are confronting an environment that it may no longer be possible to describe as natural."² Wanton's slippage between the natural and artificial, the close and the distant, the domestic and the alien provokes a postmodern unease befitting our 21st century world—and a space in which to create our own reality, even as we are reminded of its consequences.

1 *Dictionary.com* (accessed on 5 June 2011 at www.dictionary.reference.com/browse/wanton).

2 Jeffrey Deitch, *Artificial Nature*, exh. cat., (Athens: Deste Foundation for Contemporary Art, 1990): n.p.

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