Wondrous strange: The art of Elisabeth Higgins O’Connor

Courtesy of the artist
“(This is Not a) Love Song” by Sacramento-based sculptor Elisabeth Higgins O’Connor is a singular exhibition of gigantic characters – part stunned donkey, part leering dog, part fragile human struggling to stand. Higgins O’Connor invites us into a witchy world of being and becoming, attraction and recoil, pleasure and dread. We find ourselves encountering creatures wondrously strange, sinister and frail. It is a tour de force not to be missed.

Higgins O’Connor is a 2005 Master of Fine Arts graduate of UC Davis, and her show at the Verge Center for the Arts is part of a program celebrating the partnership between Verge and the university’s new Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art that opens Nov. 13. Higgins O’Connor works within the tradition of Brueghel, Bosch, Goya and contemporary artists Kathryn Spence and David Altmejd. The scruffy, unpolished facture of her work is an operatic unfolding of materials and hardscrabble magic.

Her sculpture speaks through the vernacular language of common materials retrieved and resurrected from thrift stores and craigslist. Dismantled secondhand sofas, mattress covers, bed sheets, knitted afghans, cardboard, string, twine and drywall screws are just some of the materials Higgins O’Connor uses to construct her leaning, hobbled and hugely expressive anthropomorphic entities. Standing as high as 12 feet, the sculptures loom over or lurch precariously toward us. A giant, gasping fox-headed figure stands grabbing its crotch – Michael Jackson meets Grimm’s fairy tales – and we cringe a bit. The scale is theatrical and carnival-esque. The personified creatures invoke folk festivals, and fables. Like Gulliver, we find ourselves diminished, with a child’s eye view in a kind of zombie Brobdingnag.

At the entrance to the gallery, we are greeted by “trudge” (2015), a sort of limping dog, its huge, lurching head supported by two wooden stakes in the floor, like chin crutches. It is the embodiment of exhaustion. But still standing. Within the cacophony of materials and sculptural systems used to construct the head – layers of fabric, lacings of twine – Higgins O’Connor draws a surprisingly nuanced facial expression. Out of textile scraps and coiled cheap rope we recognize the pathos of human experience.

“fever to tell” (2014) is a slightly sinister, much more able-bodied actor. Despite the gawky, rough-hewn qualities of her materials, Higgins O’Connor skillfully “draws” finely calibrated gestures using stacked and layered topographical linear contours. The anatomical accuracy of the sinuous forearms and flicked wrist of “fever to tell” animates its slow, determined stride. Despite the seemingly slapdash bundles of shingled paper and exposed interior scaffolding, the gesture implicates threat and humankind’s darker instincts, its hybridized body subtly insinuating malice. “fever to tell” is not only going to make it, but you better step aside, buster.

Collapsed back in a corner of the gallery sits a momentarily defeated donkey in the work “hate stayed the ending that love started to say” (2016). Its partially formed, or partially decayed legs of bundled paper and rags are splayed out on the floor, as if it slipped, taking a hard, unceremonious pratfall. We’ve been there. If not actually, we’ve been there metaphorically, in the place between comedy and shame, between defeat and picking ourselves up one more time.

Despite the folkloric playful charm, the sweetness of chintz fabric, and pretty wallpapers used to construct her carnival grotesques, Higgins O’Connor taps unruly desires, aggression and an unrelenting will to survive. Her sculptures are Tricksters – rude upstarts – and they are
surrogates of our selves. To encounter one of her lumbering creatures, disheveled and contingent, we encounter our own posturing, our own trials and false starts.

Joining the Higgins O'Connor show, “Windows,” by Minnesota-based artist Mathew Zefeldt, is an exhibition of conceptually based monumental painting. Zefeldt, a 2011 Master of Fine Arts graduate of UC Davis, was also chosen by Verge to celebrate the opening of the Shrem. Verge’s ambitious programming of visual art is a huge asset to this region. Its partnership with the Shrem will increase opportunities for museum-quality exhibitions of contemporary art.

**(THIS IS NOT A) LOVE SONG**

**What:** An exhibit of art by Elisabeth Higgins O’Connor  
**Where:** Verge Center for the Arts, 625 S St., Sacramento  
**When:** 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday; noon-5 p.m. Sunday. Through Oct. 16  
**Information:** 916-448-2985; vergeart.com