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UCLA's MFAs Take On Power Structures

While some of the works lack the finesse of more seasoned veterans, these artists have cultivated firm, incisive critiques of the powers that be.

Claudia Ross April 23, 2024

Boz Deseo Garden, "Pale Coast: A Cenotaph" (2022), video (all photos Claudia Ross/*Hyperallergic*)

LOS ANGELES — MFA programs operate like small monarchies. Within each of their royal families, ancient decisions calcify into creation myths: recalcitrant tenured faculty members retain small cohorts of unruly proteges, and niche preferences dictate the cultural production of the populace. These court dramas provide a rich backdrop for UCLA's MFA Exhibition #3 at the university's New Wight Gallery, where four graduating students present artwork united by its shared investigation and critique of institutional power. From half-fictional examinations of American waste management to glittering paintings of an empty Oval Office, TJ Shin, Dakota Higgins, Sophie Friedman-Pappas, and Boz Des Garden each engage in multidisciplinary practices that defamiliarize dominant political narratives.

Media shapes contemporary encounters with power, both proliferating and deconstructing myths that inform a broader cultural imaginary. In Boz Deseo Garden's nearly 40-minute video

work, “Pale Coast: A Cenotaph”(2022), the artist collages speculative and documentary accounts of waste-to-energy incineration facilities, tracing an unstable lineage of harm that has had disproportionate effects on Black communities. (The 1986 mass dumping of 4,000 tons of toxic ash in Gonaïves, Haiti, by Philadelphian incinerators offers one prominent example.) Across the gallery, TJ Shin’s two-channel video, “Duration” (2023–24), projects footage from the artist’s visit to the demilitarized zone between North Korea and South Korea onto two hanging metal sheets that function as screens. Hazy images of film strips and degraded exposures overlay agricultural scenes and jungle vistas, forming a fragmented, self-aware montage that circumscribes views of the DMZ with techniques that emphasize the video’s technological mediation.

Dakota Higgins, “Impression of an Artist’s Ladder (Vrymoed, 2)” (2023), pigmented silicone, installation dimensions variable

Other works take a more humorous tack in their interrogations of authority. In “Wall Street Insider’s Tour” (2023–24), Sophie Friedman-Pappas fashions a ceramic projector to resemble fake, rusticated wood, to display footage from a tour of New York’s Wall Street. The small, circular projection offers close-ups of attendees’ faces and the Neoclassical columns of prominent financial buildings; the paranoid, frenetic cinematography underscores the

absurdity of the tour's purported institutional disclosure. Elsewhere, Dakota Higgins uses glitter paint and cardboard to depict sparkling, but empty, governmental interiors. These simple compositions of vacant rooms and limp American flags satirize the shimmering mythos of US democracy: “() (6) (Portrait of George)” (2024) imagines a presidential portrait without a sitter, its jewel-like gloss accenting the absence of a legitimate political figure.

UCLA boasts a commitment to experimental, multidisciplinary art that can ideally withstand the temptation of more salable studio practices. Thankfully, the lure of digestible figurative painting and benign abstract sculpture was absent at New Wight Gallery. While some of the works lack the finesse or focus of more seasoned conceptual veterans, these artists have cultivated firm, incisive critiques of the powers that be — a welcome change from the manicured aesthetics that haunt most of the region's major galleries today.

Dakota Higgins, “() (42) (Plate)” (2023), glitter on cardboard on panel, 49.5 x 41 inches

2024 UCLA MFA Exhibition #3 continues at UCLA's New Wight Gallery (Broad Art Center, Suite 1100, Westwood, Los Angeles) through April 26.