

dialogue

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July | August 2000

Janet Pihlblad: New Work

Carrie Secrist Gallery

24 March - 29 April

by Esther Grisham

In elegantly reserved works made from a compost of organic and high-tech matter, Janet Pihlblad punctuates the detachment and disorientation amid nature that human beings who live apart from it experience. Through an austerity of presentation and lyrical, pristine compositions, Pihlblad's art gently announces the ways in which industrialized peoples have a complex relationship to the natural world. While her work is so clean and slight that it threatens to become overly decorative, its low hum is constant, mildly disguising the tempest of possibilities at its essence.

Among the five works on view, including three graceful, yet somewhat prosaic pieces whose compositions are comprised mainly of carefully preserved leaves, are two installations that carry the weight of the exhibition.

In *Window for Thoreau*, Pihlblad sets the scene for interaction by positioning a laptop computer on a white pedestal and in front of a faux window inserted into the gallery's wall. Instead of an expansive view of the outdoors, the "window" is filled with moss that seems to be encroaching inward. The computer screen sits ready for visitors to type a message using a font, a flamboyant and curly

script the artist created that is based upon the handwriting of American transcendentalist poet and philosopher Henry David Thoreau. Hanging on the large, adjacent wall are print-outs of previous viewers' messages alongside writings of Thoreau. As a result, mixed with Thoreau's poetic contemplations of nature are a variety of statements such as "You have a wonderful gallery," and "I see green, I am at peace." Brought to the fore in this work is the fact that attempts to ascertain nature through acts of writing, making art, and simply looking out at nature from safe places can be somewhat ironical if touching activities, since we are, inescapably, governed by it.

With the second installation, *Personification*, Pihlblad even more heartily and whimsically demonstrates this conundrum. She constructs another wall insert filled with moss, which is the centerpiece for two flanking walls' worth of ink-jet prints of artworks, kitchen paraphernalia, and illustrations that feature semi-human vegetables, pumpkin-headed figurines, personified corn-on-the-cobs, etc. Framed in wood carved in a foliate motif, the moss-laden focal point resembles a mirror. In front of this is a high, narrow white table supporting another moss-filled frame in

the shape of an old-fashioned hand mirror. Each "mirror" replaces our would-be reflections with green, as if this is our true color, our true nature. The wonderful, fanciful images on the left and right walls include the 16th-century Milanese painter Giuseppe Arcimboldi's famous vegetable/human head silhouettes, along with a teapot in the form of an orange with a twinkling face, a pickle and tomato sitting down to dinner together, and other such delightful hybrids that express, among other things, a conflicted desire both to meld with and separate from nature.

Pihlblad's art, as exemplified in these installations, is most satisfying when the boundaries between the human world and the (other) natural world are knocked down and a jarringly seamless flow arises between the two.

Esther Grisham is a Chicago writer and the associate director of Marwen.

Janet Pihlblad

Window for Thoreau

1999-2000. Mixed-media installation, dimensions variable.

