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After the Unicorns

The neopaganists at Roots & Culture transcend kitsch.

SOMETIMES IT SEEMS that fine artists do little these days but rehash the tropes of midcentury minimalist, pop, and conceptual artists, who gazed into the void with an emotionless mix of nihilistic irony and pseudo-Zen austerity. But scenesters, and attentive shoppers at Urban Outfitters, know that the aughts have been blessed with a refreshingly romantic interest in pagan subjects and iconography, often expressed with preschoolish brio: imagine an orgy in a forest with bearded unicorns sporting magic fanny packs. This work is often written off, owing perhaps to its greater visibility as a fashion statement than an academically validated movement. But "Explore Your World," a show of "narrative" paintings by nine artists at the brand-new gallery Roots & Culture, reveals the hopeful directions this self-conscious space-hippie art can take.

The freaked-out-pastoral look originated in Providence, Rhode Island, where it was popularized in the self-published books of artists Chris Forgues, Megan Kelso, Leif Goldberg, and Jo Dery. Former Chicagoan Edie Fake, creator of the comic book *Gaylord Phoenix*, is another noteworthy exponent. The artist in "Explore Your World" sticking closest to their graphic style is Kate Gronner, whose two vivid tableaux feature masses of furry animals in a dreamlike, bleak medieval-futuristic setting. Details in Gronner's pieces include a cat-headed hipster atomizing a bunny with an X-ray beam in front of a castle and a factory with a sign that proclaims "Coming Soon, Cement City. Featuring . . . More Humans!" Monstrosity seems the only alternative to a culture steeped in artificiality.

Gronner's works illustrate the school's theoretical foothold in the poetic utopian writing of Gilles Deleuze, a 20th-century philosopher who avoids both the rational discourse of the Enlightenment and the Freudian rationalization of irrationality. He speaks of artists "becoming animal" and entering the shared nonconscious experience of the "pack," in which static ego boundaries dissolve into the synergy of the environment, shot through by forces of desire and violence. Where earlier neopagan artwork was frequently heavily-handedly kitschy, the pieces in "Explore Your World" often engage movingly in this dynamistic worldview, delivering some mesmerizing, magical images

of people subsumed by and subsuming the natural world.

Kitsch makes an appearance in Isak Applin's pieces, which reference bucolic thrift-store landscapes, Kodak snapshots, and a much-reprinted Matisse painting, *The Dance*. But his touch is light -- literally, as his paintings are composed of transparent daubs of watercolor tracing a sun-dappled image on a white page. His delicacy counters the images' potential snideness, while they remain saccharine enough to not feel overthought. Nate Wolf also uses water and forest settings for his simultaneously mundane, strange, and comic bacchanalia. He apparently constructs his compositions from thick swipes of color, which he then interprets with lattices of rocks, branches, ropes, and netting. Indeterminate human figures at play, rendered in a few well-chosen lobs of oil paint, melt into the space, creating a crowded everyday panorama seemingly viewed through a swirling cloud of chaotic group energy.

Jeremy Somer's oils extend this sense of ecstatic disorder, suggesting a supernatural underworld marked by a sense of humor. In *Stinkclops* a shadowy grove is haunted by the murky eponymous monster -- and the paint almost takes over the image, creating an atmosphere of stifling stench. Perhaps my favorite piece in the show, Somer's *Levelling Torment*, features a flaming demon and a blurry frozen wraith poised at the mouth of a cutaway torch-lit cave -- an elegant, possibly tongue-in-cheek representation of primal preconscious states nearly worthy of surrealist master Remedios Varo. There aren't many ways for the alienated, agnostic aesthete to overcome the fixation on authenticity and inauthenticity that has obsessed artists and snobs of all stripes for over a century. The images in "Explore Your World" have a noisy joy and uncanny sense of community I haven't found in many other shows. This is art that's fantastic but not absurd, fanciful but not delusional. It makes bold but lighthearted claims for some kind of future, or at least the possibility that possibilities exist, viewing truth, complexity, and meaning as not unreachable but merely somewhat irrelevant.

Cautious optimism seems to be one of the gallery's hallmarks too. Roots & Culture founder, artist, and "Explore Your World" curator Eric May wants the nonprofit space to become a decentralized community forum -- he's asking others to curate its film program, lecture series, and other upcoming initiatives and events. He's hoping people will take an interest and come in to create programming. With luck, Roots & Culture might help bring back the glory days of bygone nonprofit independents Randolph Street Gallery and NAME, when Chicago was a center of public discourse on art.

By Bert Stabler