

Art City

Art and architecture critic Mary Louise Schumacher explores Milwaukee's creative endeavors

REVIEW: 'Freak Parade' at the Haggerty Museum of Art

By Mary Louise Schumacher of the Journal Sentinel

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In an age of cultural homogeneity, artist Thomas Woodruff mobilizes a luscious, sparkling world of difference, a siren's song of noble and uninhibited mutants.

His "Freak Parade," on view at the Haggerty Museum of Art, is a cavalcade of misfits strung together in proud promenade across more than 30 large paintings on black rag paper.

Hung on shockingly saturated raspberry- and lime-colored walls like circus posters, edged by grommets and secured with corsage pins, the works direct us on a clockwise march through the galleries.

There is an irony in this, of course, as we make the physical pilgrimage past images of floats and high marching characters. They are, after all, suspended there.

And while we can't help but look at the sickly skin, the strange tufts of hair, the nobby protrusions, the peculiar hybridities with some revulsion, what is most striking about Woodruff's world is its almost impossible luminosity, its outlandish beauty.

The New York-based artist lovingly poured five years into rendering his grotesques, a microcosm of the human condition, with a fanatical degree of detail. The gorgeous glow of this work is elusive in reproductions, which don't begin to do them justice.



Every manner of animal, vegetable and mineral is here, it seems, from the sweet and misshapen unicorn in "Miss Giggles" to the menacing panther of "Bruised Beast," from the creature constructed of spinach and endive in "Man of Lettuce" to the cigar-smoking coral character in "Smoke and Mirrors."

And nearly all of Woodruff's wayfarers get a tiara, headdress or shiny top hat. From the stout, cake-like tier of mushrooms, carnations and sea shells atop "Poor Mr. P" to the Vegas-style number

of carrot tops, coral, spider webs and amaryllis blooms towering above "Legendary Bulb," they are bestowed as a sign of respect.

One of the most beautiful is the thorny crown of red coral integrated into the blonde mohawk of "Flower Boy," a man with red skin, six arms, a tail and high-heeled boots. He balances flower vases on his body and himself on a ruffled, pink, rolling stool. Thistly plants sprout from the clear, glass orbs set out on his hands, knees and head. Light is pooled and refracted with Vermeer-esque skill in the vessels and the pearls strung about his neck.

Like a Hindu god, this tough-looking dude, enmeshed in a riot of barbed and prickly vegetation, has the unmistakable appearance of strength and calm.

His counterpart, "Flower Girl I," is among the more memorable characters in Woodruff's convoy. The young damsel walks on nubbin-like tiptoe. Her long, blackish-gray hair and a train of flowers trail behind her, and snails are perched on her outstretched arms. Her lips purse and part perfectly, like a sleeping doll.



But the girl's dominant features are her tiny, truncated body and her over-sized, pearlescent eyelids, which seem to be forever shut. With the opaline beauty of hollowed out sea shells and rimmed with glitter-tipped lashes, her eyes are like tender, swollen sores.



In a curving sweep of purple prose, both literal (as in purple letters on the page) and figurative, Woodruff warns us to let his “stumbling stumpy,” his “wobbly pupa” be: “Bruised from deep slumber.....do not disturb her, it may cause her more damage. She dreams of spectacles, of pageants and fetes in princedom by the sea.”

The parade reaches its “stunning conclusion” in a float made of filigreed coral that glides on ice skates and spans five paintings. Bringing up the rear of the float is a mysterious creature that is part Santa, part bride, part underwater colony of organisms.

Throughout the series, the figures are connected one to the next with silvery chains and magenta ribbons. It is as if they are slowly being tugged along in this slow-moving procession. Or maybe they are just bound by their anatomical and psychological otherness.

Artful, Victorian script decorates, narrates and connects the parade with humor and poignancy, too.

A sort of ancient and primal iconography – of carrots, carnations, coral, insect wings, polka-dotted mushrooms, big-eared mice, pearls, bubbles, sundry stumps and hummingbirds – also threads through the cycle like a sort of visual circulatory system.

While Woodruff's tropes recall others from the history of art, including the work of Hieronymus Bosch, Pieter Bruegel, William Blake, James Ensor, Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Odilon Redon, Edvard Munch and Pompeian frescoes, the sublime and delicate vision is his own genius.



Woodruff dedicates his heroic outsiders, in the book of the same title, “to all those irregulars in shape or spirit, you know who you are.”

The show is, in other words, an extreme act of empathy toward all of us. It is about what it means to be a freak. It is about the dignity and grandeur of weirdness. And anyone who doesn't see a bit of his or her own underbelly in this malignant mélange might want to take another look.

Read a Q&A with Woodruff [here](#). "Freak Parade" is on view at the Haggerty Museum of Art through April 18.