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‘Costumes, reverence and forms’: And the greatest of these is reverence

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I have been thinking about *Costumes, Reverence, and Forms* currently at the [Center for Contemporary Art and Culture](#) for the better part of a week. When I first saw the show, I was perplexed. Partially, the reaction can be chalked up to the gallery map provided at the entrance that identified the artist and title for each work. The map was based on a building blueprint with confounding layout features—a hidden staircase, an unseen office, a set of what look like four stove-top burners nowhere to be found. But beyond the map, I felt intimidated by the work, concerned that I just didn’t get it.

But once I made peace with my spatial inadequacies and considered the show further, my initial hesitation faded. So what I want to tell you is what I wish I had known going into gallery and what has helped me move beyond my initial “huh?” reaction.

Tabitha Nikolai’s “Sick Transex Gloria,” part of “Costumes, Reverence, and Forms” at the Center for Contemporary Art and Culture/Photo by Mario Gallucci

The exhibition is a curatorial exchange between CCAC in Portland and Vox Populi in Philadelphia. Vox Populi is an artist-run space and the curatorial group that participated in the exchange included Mark Stockton, Bree Pickering, Chad States, and Suzanne Seesman. CCAC is part of the Pacific Northwest College of Art. The Center’s director, Mack McFarland, and assistant director, Ashley Gibson, were the curators from Portland.

The Portland and Philadelphia curators each generated a list of about 100 artists in their respective cities to give to their counterparts in the other city. The curators then looked through the artists’ websites and culled the field to about 20 artists they wanted to do studio visits with on a visit to the other city. From the “semi-final” group of studio-visit artists, each set of curators selected four artists to be in the show. This all took the better part of a year and involved many conversations between the curators and artists. The “guiding principle” terms—costumes, reverence, and

forms—were chosen after the roster of artists had been determined. There was an iteration of the show in Philadelphia in January of 2017 and the show opened in Portland in April.

The curators didn't select individual works but instead selected the artists whose practices they were most struck by. Both sides were surprised by some of the other's finalists. The selection of works for the shows was much more fluid and artist-directed. Some of the artists wanted to show newer work than the curators had seen in the studio visits, and others wanted to respond specifically to the exhibition space. While the shows in both locations included all of the same artists, the roster of works included is not identical.

The Vox Populi show had an entry archway that clearly identified which artists were from which city. The CCAC version didn't indicate this except in the gallery brochure. Portland artists were identified with a small blue arch and Philadelphia artists with a small pink arch. There was no "key" for these symbols though (and I actually just figured it out now, leaving me again feeling a little slow). Marianne Dages, Beth Heinly, Anna Neighbor, and Kristen Neville Taylor are the artists from Philadelphia. Avantika Bawa, Tabitha Nikolai, Jess Perlitz and Ralph Pugay are the artists from Portland.

Portland viewers encounter Jess Perlitz's *Observer* before they enter the Lemelson Gallery space at PNCA. The plaster monolith looms at the opposite end of the historic hallway from the building entrance, so the face gradually reveals itself as you advance toward it. It recalls a Rapa Nui moai, though more gently tumbled and rounded, and sets the tone for the show. Perlitz's gallery brochure bio intimates her interest in masks, landscape, and self-definition. *Observer* seemed an apt touchstone, both as a hollow sentinel and in its incremental revelation.

In the entryway of the Lemelson, Perlitz's untitled collages face off against an arrangement of works by Kristen Neville Taylor. Taylor's pieces are individually titled but appear as a coherent group. The banner poem that dominates the arrangement was inspired by a 19th-century painting, *The Landing of Columbus* by John Vanderlyn. Taylor explains that she was interested in observing the painting without speculative impositions. The resultant text is juxtaposed with a collection of different-sized and -colored spheres made of "pulverized objects and adhesive." The pulverized substance is subsumed in the spherical shape, perhaps paralleling the typical relationship between our observations and expectations (an assessment, which is based, ironically, on both observation and speculation). The other two works form a sort of hinged diptych with a shadow on the wall behind from *Study for Empty Hands*.

Kristen Neville Taylor's installation, part of "Costumes, Reverence, and Forms" at the Center for Contemporary Art and Culture/Photo by Mario Gallucci

The combination of Taylor's spheres and Marianne Dages's *Firmament I* and *Firmament II* provides a clear invitation to consider the "guiding principle" of form. Dages's two groupings of four monoprints are disc shaped and so balance the 3-D sphere with a 2-D disc. Each disc looks to be a different arrested moment of some variant of smoky vapor. Delicate chains link the four discs of each set.

Marianne Dages's "Firmament II," part of "Costumes, Reverence, and Forms" at the Center for Contemporary Art and Culture/Photo by Mario Gallucci

The looping forms are apparent throughout. Across from Dages's *Firmament I* and *Firmament II*, Perlitz's *Light Masks* hover high above with a tangle of looping cords. Ralph Pugay's *Select Looping Animations Volume 1* results in a similar chorus of loops, both virtual (in the repetition of the animations) and actual (in the tangle of necessary cords).



Avantika Bawa's "Anti Vanta," part of "Costumes, Reverence, and Forms" at the Center for Contemporary Art and Culture/Photo by Mario Gallucci

One of the most striking "forms" was the hovering black void of Avantika Bawa's *Anti Vanta*. This seemed equally an afterimage of the huge windows opposite it in the gallery and the dark parallel to Perlitz's chalk-colored *Observer*.

The “Costumes” inspiration was similarly evident. Much of Beth Heinly’s performance work uses costumes to up-end quotidian expectations of a space, or as a vehicle for exploring other sides of the self or other personalities. Heinly organized the Open Call Guerilla Outdoor Performance Festival as part of *Costumes, Reverence, and Forms*. This was a three-day event staged in the North and South Park Blocks April 17-19. The first two days were open call performances from multiple artists, and on the third day Heinly performed seven unique pieces, including *Consider the Lobster: Surrealist ‘Nude’ in Landscape* and *Umbrella Cosplay*. Absurdist costumes were central.



Beth Heinly’s video installation, part of “Costumes, Reverence, and Forms” at the Center for Contemporary Art and Culture/Photo by Mario Gallucci

Tabitha Nikolai’s *Sick Transex Gloria*, a nice play on *Sic transit gloria mundi* (“Thus passes the glory of the world), is a striking assortment of costumed mannequins. There is a plant-headed mannequin complete with camouflage athletic tights and hiking boots. A second figure has a jackal-esque head with rubber glove black horns, a shaggy fur cape, a six-pack of breasts, a strap-on phallus and swim flippers. An elegant, green-caped (and armed), astronaut princess rounds out the triad. The grouping is weird and wonderful and a welcome sculptural manifestation of Nikolai’s virtual gaming worlds about transformation. One of the “virtual environments” was also included in the show, but my gaming abilities are so non-existent that I wasn’t able to see as much of the created world as I would have liked.

Jess Perlitz’s “Observer,” part of “Costumes, Reverence, and Forms” at the Center for Contemporary Art and Culture/Photo by Mario Gallucci

“Reverence” was the least obvious category to me. I don’t think I’m alone in having trouble pairing the idea of reverence with plant commandos and surrealist lobsters. I had to ask.

Mack McFarland (CCAC Director) explained that it wasn’t reverence as a theme but instead as an attitude: reverence for art practice, making, and process. Mark Stockton (a Vox Populi curator) added that the term connected to the mutual regard held for the cities and their artists. Reverence connects to the artists’ dedication to translate, transform, and transmogrify ideas into visual form and for the communities that support and challenge them.

I settle on reverence because now I see it as the linchpin for the exhibition. After all this, I wonder if the show should more accurately be titled “Reverence: Costumes and Forms.” The curators didn’t pick individual works; they picked artists that they felt embodied some aspect of what was exciting about the art being produced in the “sister” community. The reverence is the activity and the attitude.

I would add that reverence is equally a charge to the viewer. It is reverence for art and respect for unraveling meaning that moves the viewer from ‘huh’ to appreciation.

I started with “perplexed” and I’m going to end with “jealous.” The curators of this show got to spend a year looking at artist websites, doing studio visits, and considering connections. It did feel as though they were so close to the project that some aspects needed additional explanation. Even brief explanations or definitions of the three “guiding principles” in the gallery brochure could have alleviated some viewer consternation. So I am jealous that I wasn’t privy to a fuller version of the conversations they must have had—and that must have been fascinating. But I’m grateful to have had the opportunity to see and consider the results.

Neither Portland nor Philadelphia is considered a global hub for art making. But both are vibrant communities with exciting artists, collectives, institutions, and curators. Geography as an organizing principle is often dismissed as pedestrian or even outmoded but this artistic exchange between river cities on opposite coasts proves the value of place-based explorations. Art communities can easily become isolated. Considering the “other” helps to open up dialogue, establish new relationships and provide new opportunities for artists and viewers alike.

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Costumes, Reverence, and Forms continues at the Center for Contemporary Art and Culture, in the Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Center for Art and Design, 511 NW Broadway, through June 3. The hours are 11 am-5 pm Thursdays-Saturdays, Tuesday and Wednesday by appointment only.