

Art

Reviews

“Apocalyptic Pop”

★★★★★

Dorsky Gallery, through Jan 25
(see Elsewhere)

A show meditates on the end-time, minus the pyrotechnics.

By Michael Wilson

For an exhibition with such a lurid title, “Apocalyptic Pop” looks oddly restrained. The hyperreal panoramic catastrophes of David LaChapelle’s recent “Auguries of Innocence” series, say, or the gory extremity of Jake and Dinos Chapman’s *Fucking Hell* are apparently not for curator Kathleen Goncharov. Instead, Goncharov, director of Rutgers University’s wonderfully named Brodsky Center for Innovative Editions, opts for a rather less spectacular vision of the end of days, gathering work by five artists (and one group) who leaven a doomy outlook with vernacular twists that are sometimes humorous, though not, for the most part, visually flamboyant.

In her essay for the show, Goncharov quotes Jerome Jaffe of featured collective TODT: “It’s not Pop Art. It’s art about what pops up, such as insurgents in Iraq wearing Rambo T-shirts.” In other words, while the artists here share some of Pop Art’s inspirational sources—TV, film, comic strips—and are sensitive to the ironies therein, they generally adopt alternative methods to explore them. They also tend to be more interested in religion than the first-generation Pop artists (Andy Warhol was a devout Catholic but, with the exception of his late, undistinguished “Last Supper” paintings, kept his art and faith separate).

But while Goncharov in her text clearly links the popularity of crackpot faith to predictions of real-world cataclysm, the artists in show express the idea a bit more subtly. Jody Culkkin’s photographs, for instance, meditate on the persistence of the devotional object rather than of the peculiarities of any specific doctrine. Picturing bits of tacky modern jewelry (miniature figurines, teeny-tiny sneakers) as seen through an electron microscope, Culkkin



D. Dominick Lombardi, *Beachcomber*

gives her subjects the aura of mysterious antiques. Enlarging and printing them in somber black-and-white, the artist delivers a wry comment on our hardwired weakness for totems and idols.

Michael Zansky also invests common objects with previously unsuspected authority by tweaking our optical perception of them, as well as by manipulating context to complicate meaning. In a trio of rough-hewn dioramas arrayed behind plastic lenses that both magnify and distort, Zansky presents oddball arrangements of salvaged bits and bobs that hint at forgotten historical narratives. It is hard to define exactly what ties the contents of any given assemblage

together, but the very effort of trying to reconcile a bust of Voltaire, for example, with lengths of metallic tubing (as in *Echo*) momentarily and

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amusingly transforms viewers into archaeologists, groping for a significance that may or may not exist.

The allusions conjured by Chitra Ganesh are similarly legion, but are a little easier to pin down. Ransacking

Hindu mythology, Bollywood and Indian pop music, she crowds the fruits of her research into cartoonlike digital prints that depict alarming tales of cosmic crime and punishment. Here, human dreams and aspirations quaver under constant threat from supernatural forces. The panels’ all-action graphic style has an appealing immediacy, though the high-octane language that screams from various text boxes and speech bubbles, while aesthetically appropriate, grates a bit.

Also making use of a boldly stylized look is the aforementioned TODT, a long-established team which takes its name from an old German word for death, and whose work is marked by hell-in-a-handbasket preoccupations with governmental conspiracy, weird science and the planet’s irreversible decay. Its illustrated tiles, dubbed “Flag Stones,” suggest instructions for surviving a bombing, and imagine airline-safety diagrams and disembodied limbs. Elsewhere, large sculptures fuse the machinery of agriculture with emblems of death: In *Reaper*, a plow is tricked out with a fearsome row of scythes. The allegory of environmental exploitation is far from subtle, but sticks in the memory like the best propaganda.

The efforts of two artists sharing Dorsky’s poky project room are less impactful. Laura Parnes’s video *The Only Ones Left* draws on filmic clichés to align the deathly arrogance of career criminals with that of our political leaders, but its message is hamstrung by ponderous construction. D. Dominick Lombardi’s drawings and sculptures create imaginary mutations in which incongruous components are forced together and familiar icons are warped beyond recognition. Although closer to the mark than Parnes’s contribution, Lombardi’s work suffers greatly from its cramped presentation.

Throughout art history, the most famous visions of Judgment Day tend to skew heavily toward the idea of humanity going out in blaze of fire and brimstone. But if the muted “Apocalyptic Pop” is any guide, we’re much more likely to end with a whimper instead of a bang. ■