

Politically Charged: Petroleum Paradox Art

Hidden away on the 4th floor of the building at 529 W. 20th St. (with plenty of loud construction nearby), Denise Bibro Fine Art Gallery is a hole-in-the-wall art space with visually appealing and politically stimulating pieces. Last week, it unveiled the results of its collaboration with the Women's Caucus for Art: The Petroleum Paradox: For Better or for Worse? art exhibition.

Social activism is one of the Women's Caucus claims to fame, and when I entered the exhibit, it came as no surprise. Almost front and center from the entrance is Johnny Everyman's "Obama wants you." The Uncle Sam poster that all American-borns know from childbirth was replaced with none other than Barack Obama. The slogan at the bottom was no militaristic tagline but instead read, "I want you to think there's nothing wrong with my energy policy." At the top right, Obama balanced a flaming earth on his finger like a basketball star.

As this Obama piece clearly showed, the exhibit was political but overall, not partisan. Three works to the left, I came upon Karen M Gutfreund's "I want my WMD's" bearing the likenesses of Condoleezza Rice, Dick Cheney, and who other than George W. Bush himself.

Regardless of the political affiliations of these two artists, the exhibit's message was clear: the existence of petroleum is pervasive. Some pieces, like "Obama wants you" and "I want my WMD's," all but point at conspiracy. Others are subtler in their tactics to the point that they seem to be not condemning but aestheticizing petroleum. "This is Not Water" is a resin plexi glass with several water-like ripples frozen in action but mysteriously is not made out of petroleum at all, while "The Outcome" uses fiery-painted aluminum foil – perhaps, I thought, to cast an ominous glance on the future of a world based in petroleum?



By far the most poignant work was Robin M. Jordan's "Breeze Above Ground." It captured the "paradox" of oil most poignantly. A slab of glass was set up horizontally. Over it, a "breeze" was represented by a winding steel knot. Underneath dangled sea creatures from strings: Sea flowers, squid, jellyfish, kelp, and coral, each no bigger than my thumb. They were limp and faded in color. The paradox? The sea creatures themselves were made out of plastic, monofilament, glass beads, monofilament, and umbrella detritus. The exhibit, in acknowledging how pervasive petroleum is, couldn't get away from relying on petrochemicals.

Once you finish the exhibit, go next door and seeing Linda Lappa's Split Second NYC. Even if – and especially if – petroleum doesn't get political activism pumping through your veins, there's no better way to end the day than seeing paintings of NYC traffic and the MTA system frozen while in motion. Denise Bibro has a trove of artistic gems that remain hidden away in the bowels of 529 W. 20th St. and New Yorkers would do well to scope them out.

On view until June 23, 2012. Denise Bibro Fine Art Gallery, 529 W. 20th St. Free admission. Tues-Sat 11am-6pm. C, E to W. 23rd St

-Andrea Garcia-Vargas