Art

INTO THE WOODS AT THOMAS MCCORMICK
RICHARD MAYHEW AT G.R. N’NAMDI
MARCO CASENTINI AT ROY BOYD

Nature Denatured

The natural world all but disappears in three current shows about it.

By Tony Adler

The group show at Thomas McCormick is called “Into the Woods,” just like the musical by Stephen Sondheim—a reference that makes no sense at all, except as irony. Sondheim’s woods are a truly wild place where all rational bets are off. It’s a habitat for blood-sucking giants, spell-casting witches, and libidinous wolves—both of the world and completely off the edges of it. An environment into which people disappear. McCormick’s woods are precisely the opposite: an environment that disappears into people. Virtually every one of the 26 works in this aesthetically thin but thought-provoking show depicts the natural world diminished—sometimes to the point of negation, sometimes by—by exposure to the human.

Emblematic of the general tendency is Jeff Carter’s Segment, a group of aluminum “bamboo” stalks set to swaying by little motors in their bases. Never mind the quaint fact that an art lover can buy the stalks singly or in discounted multiples, there’s something disconcertingly restful in the sight of these tall, segmented columns riffing in a nonexistent breeze. It’s like one of those videotapes of a roaring fire. That the stalks have a white metallic sheen somehow doesn’t mitigate their pastoral calm; it simply disengages the pastoral from any sense of a pasture.

A similar disengagement occurs in Anna Shneyshlevyegor’s four-by-five-foot color photo, Tires. Only in this case the pastoral element is a bit of Siberian landscape, colonized by discarded automobile tires. There’s an incongruous beauty in the eight black circles half-submerged in a pond under a white sky—and an equally incongruous sense of profundity imparted by the knowledge that those circles won’t decay anywhere near as quickly as their surroundings; that, unlike the water, the scrubby ground, the mountains in the background, or the sky itself, the tires are effectively eternal.

Nature becomes cartography in Cadence Giersbach’s painting Niagara Falls II, which has the look of a topographical map. It turns binary in Scott Woliak’s pencil drawing, Light on Water, which reduces the phenomenon of reflection to something resembling a first-generation computer printout. It’s undercut by a media-savvy punch line in Jason Lazarus’s untitled photo showing a gorgeous moonlit beach with the words “currently represented” written in the sand along the shore. Andreas Fischer pushes it over into kitsch with Her Parents Told Her That She Could Be Anything She Wanted When She Grew Up so She Told Them That She Wanted to Be a Seal, an acrylic-on-canvas image of a nude woman in an arctic setting with a seal mask covering her head. And John Parot relegates it to the status of a screensaver in his modified photographic work by placing forest scenes behind bizarre collaged images of women.

Not every artist here is intent on denaturing nature. Melanie...
Schiff tries to make friends with it in her hockey-sweet photo showing a topless woman doing a handsstand in a forest clearing. But only one piece expresses anything approaching a sense of the unbuilt world as a locus of power: Gisela Insuast’s installation Camino. Deceptively simple, even flimsy, Camino consists of a great many long, thin wooden rods painted various shades of green and hung in clusters from a wire ceiling grid. A narrow path winds through the thick clusters, and the aura of threat and mystery, isolation and serenity—of having walked into a separate reality—is as palpable as when you allow yourself to disappear into the woods.

The notion of nature disappearing into people isn’t unique to “Into the Woods.” Work by Richard Mayhew at G.R. N’Namdi and Marco Casentini at Roy Boyd reflects the same process. And does it rather marvellously at times. In his extraordinary oil paintings Mayhew takes landscapes—woodlands, glens, outcropings, hilly passes—and abstracts them into vivid color-rich compositions. In Squall Rise, for instance, he turns a flowered field into horizontal bands of motled color (Mayhew’s very big on horizontal bands of motled color) rising from hot violet, ochre, and orange through a deepening purple into the blues and grays of the distance and sky. The result is not unlike what you’d imagine Monet might have done if he’d painted California. Mayhew isn’t Monet, however. His vision amounts to squinting at the world until it looks good. As titles like Sanctuary and Sacred Passage suggest, he seems to regard this squinting as a form of mystic celebration. But it also has a sanitizing quality that depletes the work. The world is subsumed by technique, and what we end up appreciating more than anything is Mayhew’s incredible poise.

Casentini, meanwhile, doesn’t even squint. He seems to close his eyes and paint what seeps through the lids. His Rothko-like canvases resolve into squares of subtly distinguishable color. Morning: white on white. Ocean: blue on blue. Summer Time: red on red. Indian Summer: various yel lows. The paintings are pleasant because Casentini’s color sense is good, the works are crisply done, and it’s possible to think of them romantically, as reveries occurring in some place where the mornings are actually white. They never rise, however, from romance to a plane of essence, much less ecstasy. As comments on reality they’re all about nature disappeared.

Richard Mayhew
WHEN Through 12/2
WHERE G.R. N’Namdi, 110 N. Peoria
INFO 312-563-9240

Marco Casentini
WHEN Through 11/29
WHERE Roy Boyd, 739 N. Wells
INFO 312-642-1606