

Art Review

Flesh and Fantasy

'Carnivalization' in David Castillo Gallery's Group Show and Fetish-like Representations in Sara Stites' Solo Show

By Michelle Weinberg

The premise for *Structure and Stories*, a group exhibition at David Castillo Gallery organized by former Miami Art Museum curator Amy Rosenblum Martin, is a "carnivalization" of art. The theory is that the celebration of Carnival goes beyond mere exultation of the flesh. It temporarily liberates participants from the established status quo, reversing social status with unpredictable results.



Sara Stites, *Chains From Piranesi*, 2007, watercolor, ink, graphite on paper, 7' x 14' [A still from Kwabena Slaughter's *Poetry of Facts*] [Eloisa Cartonera, handpainted artist books]

Kwabena Slaughter's video, *Poetry of Facts*, is mesmerizing. The artist, dressed in pajamas that suggest he is "Persian miniature guy" (his words), assumes and holds various balletic positions, framing himself in a spherical space of dual perspectives simultaneously: an aerial view and a standard side elevation. Mimicking the flattened, decorative space of Persian miniature painting, Slaughter effectively places himself inside that painting space. His dance/yoga/martial arts positions address stillness as much as they do motion. His other works on view, created with a modified camera, distort the instantaneous snap of the camera shutter into a single long, drawn-out brush stroke, replacing the staccato frame after frame of standard film-strips with one fluid sweep.

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The stylized contortionism of Slaughter's work is installed directly across from the barely controlled slapstick video adventure of Israeli artist Guy Ben-Ner. Ben-Ner's opus to father-son rivalry, *Household*, involves contortions as well, although of a domestic nature. Ben-Ner uses the material closest at hand, his domestic environment and his children, to weave

intense tragi-comic stories. Famously, he re-created the classic novel *Moby Dick*, shot entirely on location in his kitchen, with the cheerful cooperation of his young daughter. In the mock-cinema episode here, we are introduced to Ben-Ner as prisoner, trapped underneath the crib of his toddler son. “Lo-tech” doesn’t even begin to describe this work, nor the ingenuity of our prisoner! From a fingernail, a plastic string noose and scraps of wood, Ben-Ner effects his escape. In a moment appropriated from artist Vito Acconci’s *Seedbed*, performed in 1972, in which Acconci masturbated under a false floor in a New York gallery for visitors’ pleasure, Ben-Ner masturbates to a female figure drawn in chalk on the wall, then uses his semen as the glue to fashion a hammer out of a carrot. The hammer, previously lured out of his toddler son’s hands, becomes a useful tool. The local color in this work is provided by Fisher-Price style beads, colorful wall and floor tiles, and a general arsenal of childish playthings. A combination of such reality TV fare as *Survivor* or *Man vs. Wild*, not to mention the ad-hoc confabulations of *MacGyver*, *Household* has melodramatic highs and lows. And, like *Planet of the Apes*, Ben-Ner depicts a perverse universe in which children roam free and exercise power, while parents are imprisoned without resources. This work requires a mammoth indulgence on the part of the viewer (why does video art always feel so long?), but that attention is rewarded with a work of an obsessive and intimate scale. Structure and Stories is on view through Saturday, April 7 at 2234 NW Second Ave., Miami. Call 305-573-8110. □

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On view through Sunday on the second floor of the Buena Vista Building, located at 180 NE 39th St., in the Design District, is the work of Miami Beach-based artist Sara Stites. Her meticulous drawings expose a fetish-like absorption with the nooks and crannies of human and animal anatomy. Stites lovingly renders fold upon fleshy fold with delicate hairs swarming in all directions. At turns tender, and then brutal, Stites’ work maintains a certain formal aloofness, even as she expresses a dark side. Protruding thumbs, dangling nipples and larvae-like animals are connected in decorative arrays against the background of untouched paper. Piercings and amputated body parts morph one into the other, and she has lately introduced drawings of large, black metal chains into the mix, inspired by a Piranesi engraving, accentuating a Gothic effect.

Stites’ works begin as small sketches using watercolor and ink, and then swell to large drawings using watercolor, ink and

graphite. She also exhibits some hand-painted plaster and clay figurines, some with gems embedded in their flesh. These hybrid creatures sport hooves, earlobes, a scrotum. Again, these are not really sexualized, but seem to be pets or mascots, even babies. While some evoke a repulsion response, resembling deformed specimens in jars with formaldehyde, there is no denying that they also evoke empathy, like cuddly creatures. This intense emotional confusion is no doubt due to the tenderness lavished upon them by the artist, which vibrates outward

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George Sanchez-Calderon, 2007 collaborative performance at David Castillo Gallery.

Stites' exhibition is presented courtesy of DACRA, the real estate development company headed by Craig Robins. Recently, DACRA issued an open call to local artists to submit proposals for exhibitions in available spaces throughout the Design District during March and April. Curator Tiffany Chestler reviewed proposals and assigned spaces to artists in several locations. The next group of exhibitions will open to the public on the Second Saturday event scheduled for April 14.