

Trulee Hall's Untamed Magic

than 30 minutes. "I believe that the irreducible, irreproducible effects, the pleasures, the powers, and the possibilities of an exhibition all derive from its evanescence," writes Kipnis. He goes on, "The exhibition is the only kind of theater in which actor, audience, prop, set, lighting, orchestra, even the stage itself are on stage all at the same time and none quite knows which role it plays."¹ Why try, through minimal exhibition design or verbose wall labels, to tame that magic?

Hall leaned full force into the experiential, in-the-moment potentials of exhibition-making in her first solo gallery exhibition, which arrived nearly two decades into her life as a working artist. The work, years in the making, fit together eloquently but not predictably (awkward, loose paintings contrasted technically meticulous CGI animation). *The Other and Otherwise*, as a total experience, was a reminder of how little we've come to expect of the contemporary gallery show. Such care is often incompatible with the market-driven pace that encourages artists who sell well or charm the critical establishment to produce new bodies of work every year or two. (The exhibitions in my recent memory that also offered such arresting, complete experiences played out at institutions: Ryan Trecartin's *Any Ever* [2010] at MOCA PDC and Julie Becker's installations, recreated posthumously, at the ICA London in 2018). That Hall's show was so well crafted matters mostly because the mastery of its construction made the world she was building sensorially convincing: the architecture of rooms—walls and niches that divided the gallery and differentiated bodies of work—was met with the combination of hard and soft, precise and imprecise materiality. This mix mimicked the way the expressive, erotic body butts up against and disappears into social and psychological constructs.

Hall welcomed her viewers with *Golden Corn Entryway with Boob Fountain* (all works 2018), a papier-mâché and Styrofoam wall

8 A lumpy pink ceramic jar of Hannah's Pickled Eggs sat on a lumpy dark pedestal, behind which you could see a woman's smooth bare rear on a nearby screen. The woman leaned over in front of a white lattice. In the opposite direction, across an expanse of warm green artificial turf, a multi-pane window punctuated a textured pink wall, on which a mostly pink painting hung: in it, a chicken laid an egg on a pillow, surrounded by lacy things, beads, a trellis, and another (painted this time) jar of Hannah's Pickled Eggs. Trulee Hall's *The Other and Otherwise*, the exhibition at Maccarone that closed in March, understood its own logic. It existed as a precisely-planned, well-realized but also instinctively attuned ecosystem, one that encouraged close looking, but also rewarded a quick turn of the head (see a corn husk in a video, another husk identically positioned in the adjacent painting, and another comically phallic mechanized, sculpted husk moving back and forth through a hole in the wall, all in a matter of seconds). Good exhibitions sear into you, you internalize them, and then—in a month or two—they disappear.

Yet, as critic Jeffrey Kipnis bemoans in a cynical 2006 letter to curator Paula Marincola, many contemporary exhibitions insist on counteracting their own transient nature: by trying to overly educate their audience, convince them of Big Ideas, or overwhelm them with documents and didactics, even though most gallery visitors stay no longer



Trulee Hall, *The Other and Otherwise* (2019)
(installation view). Image courtesy of
the artist and Maccarone Gallery.

that was bisected by an archway and flanked by two story-high ears of corn. Six loosely rendered, open-mouthed women, carved in relief into the gold-painted Styrofoam, flailed and floated on the wall's surface. Inside the circular archway, two ceramic breasts on either side dripped milky liquid into black receptacles. Past the breasts was a wall painted in camouflage, with a window that opened onto yet another, slightly different environment. It almost feels misleading to enumerate the show's many mediums—claymation, CGI, live action video; sculpture, found objects, carpeting, wallpaper; figurative paintings and abstractions—since the fluidity between them seemed obvious and effortless. The show, full of 59 art objects, communicated its permissiveness through the way its diverse web of materials overlapped, echoed, and opened up to each other.

In a way, Hall's permissive approach conjures the work of certain feminist forbearers, whose lack of inhibition was maligned until, suddenly and recently, it was revered. For instance, Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* (1964–1967), a lo-fi pornography that embraces awkward noises, heaviness, and real bodily fluids to portray a sexiness far more familiar and unscripted than the term “porn” typically connotes. Penny Slinger's 1973 self-portraits as an open-legged wedding cake comes to mind for similar reasons, in that it doesn't resort to irony or abjection—Slinger posing like pin-up girl, wanting to be beautiful, cheeky, and feminine while poking at the patriarchy. Residues of shame do run through Hall's work, but they came from the viewers more than the artist. It's because the lingerie-clad women who posed for portraits and caressed chickens (in Hall's *Sexy Chicks* series) could be treated as symbols of cheap and embarrassing sexuality in the hands of another that they read as so pleasantly unfettered here. In the context of this non-hierarchical, non-judgmental installation, to shame them would have been to fall prey to

cultural prejudices that the realm of *The Other and Otherwise* made passé.

But if her ethos recalls sexually libertine feminism, Hall's aesthetic is also tied up in a particularly L.A., *Helter Skelter*-era lineage. Her fluent merging of kitsch, punk, pop, and fine art impulses recalls Bruce Yonemoto, Paul McCarthy, Mike Smith, and Mike Kelley (*L.A. Times* critic, Christopher Knight, described her as “grabbing on” to their “artistic legacy” in his review of Hall's show). Yet in their work, the discomfort of absurdity and abjection could often be the point—as in McCarthy and Kelley's *Heidi*, a children's book turned psychosexual horror film—whereas Hall seems much more set on flipping the conventions of comfort. She folds realities that might cause discomfort elsewhere into scenarios that are strikingly nonchalant. Kelley has come up in relation to Hall most frequently, partly because the two artists took similar approaches to the campy, playful choreography and costuming of their actors, and the appropriation, and mutation, of sweet domestic props and interiors. They also worked together and dated—which has led to a frequent, dubious assumption that Kelley, older and more established, influenced while Hall absorbed. Among other examples though, Kelley's *The Judson Church Horse Dance* (2009), for which Hall served as the production coordinator, combined puppetry and live-action with a crafted guilelessness that had already been present in Hall's work for years.

By the time she received her MFA from CalArts in 2006, Hall was working in the mode she has since honed. Her 2004 video, *For Snowball*, about a hamster's short life, features a small snow-white pet in an awkward cage, and a human-sized replica of that cage, in which Hall wears a hamster suit and runs on her own larger-than-life wheel—the endearingly macabre narrative floats between dimensions. Fleeting, a fluffy puppet hamster appears

1. Jeffrey Kipnis, “Who's afraid of gift-wrapped kazoos?” in *What Makes a Great Exhibition?*, ed. by Paula Marincola (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 100.



Above: Trulee Hall, *Horny Ladies* (Team Effort) (2018). Acrylic, oil, and collage on reclaimed movie set backdrop, 74.5 x 90 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Maccarone Gallery.

Below: Trulee Hall, *Golden Corn Entryway with Boob Fountain* (2018). Gold leaf, Styrofoam, wood, carpet, fish rocks, papier-mâché, ceramic, acrylic, fountain, 115 x 362 x 66 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Maccarone Gallery.

onscreen. In the 2007 video, *Duster's Undoing*, a girl with ragdoll hair sews eyes and a mouth onto yarn duster. Shot in a human-sized dollhouse Hall constructed in a now-demolished Hollywood barn, as well as in an actual, small dollhouse, the narrative keeps shifting from live action to puppetry, as the duster grows petulant, violent, and then escapes out onto L.A. streets. This strategy of mixing live action, animation, and puppetry reached new levels of complexity in the Maccarone exhibition, thanks to CGI, which collapsed genres and levels of reality and fantasy even more completely—in *Pink Lattice Room Relations*, a romp on a pastel-colored set with Easter baskets as props, nude live actors in wigs and full body paint seem far more theatrical than their weirdly naturalistic CGI doppelgangers.

One immersive installation in *The Other and Otherwise*, to the right of the gallery entrance, mimicked a child's room. Three polka-dot-covered walls surrounded a blue and white bed, above which a doll on a motor rotated. She was cute and read-headed on top, and then, as she turned, her skirts flipped down to reveal a brown monster face (a ghoulish, tiny Godzilla). Hall shot the videos playing on monitors mounted on the faux brick exterior walls using the bedroom as a set (most of the videos were shot on sets that are in the show). In one video, a gray-haired man peeks through the window; in another, a gorilla holds a blond girl, who becomes a woman as footage moves between animation, puppetry, and live action. The predator/monster narratives all read as the kind of dream, or nightmare, a performatively nice, safe, seemingly suburban bedroom like this one invites, by suggesting the outside world is something to shut out.

Monsters in Hall's work are never convincing villains though. In fact, next to the omnipresent cornhusks, serpents acted as the exhibition's most prominent connective tissue. Papier-mâché versions stretched across carpeting and looped

over pedestals, while other serpents wound their way through paintings or costarred in videos. Take the video *Corn Fetish / Snake Fetish (Snake Fetish)*, in which once again a woman with pink-hued skin bends over and the green, snakey shapes that float around her appear simultaneously phallic and feminine (philosopher Hélène Cixous jokes that the creative woman “cuts herself out a paper penis” in order to create, before saying that, while men invest too much power in one body part, the female libido “is cosmic”²). Because of her skillful world-building, Hall offered artworks that were not just about feminine energy that consumes and invades patriarchal paradigms, but an attempt to send that energy, slithering, dripping, and sashaying, out into the universe.

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2. Hélène Cixous, Keith Cohen, and Paula Cohen, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 4 (Summer, 1976), 875-893.



Trulee Hall, *Herm and Exotica* (2018).
Acrylic and oil on board, 48 x 36 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and
Maccarone Gallery.