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Review

Bozic photographic exhibit at Rosemont

Susan Bozic: Synergy in Two Parts, Rosemont Art Gallery Until April 5

Vancouver artist Susan Bozic's visually sumptuous, ornately contrived work is about as far away from candid *National Geographic*-type nature photography as you can get. In numerous black-and-white photographs of nude male bodies, dried flowers, taxidermied birds, and artificial landscape vistas, she sets her sights not on recording and promoting glorious nature but on decoding and challenging both the way we represent it and how we understand it at this point in time.

Bozic's exhibition consists of two separate suites of photographs, both of which recall studio photography of the most contrived and conventional kind, from fashion photography to studio portraiture. In both of those genres, as in Bozic's work here, nothing is left to chance, and unlike in nature, everything is carefully controlled and orchestrated.

In *Harmonization*, a series of small dark close-up studies, a male nude is depicted decorated in various ways with dried flowers that, in their placement or construction, mimic his various extreme gestures. In one image, for example, Bozic lays small flowers along each vertebrae of his spine. In another, his forearms are twisted together in such a way as to mimic the branch that he holds while his hands are mimicked by its two clusters of leaves. In these elegant images, Bozic clearly suggests not our separation from nature but our inextricable union with it.

According to Bozic, by depicting this male figure interacting with natural material, she is promoting the male principle active and necessary within nature. She is, as well, opposing both conventional wisdom and contemporary eco-feminist interpretations, which link nature to nurture and thus associate nature exclusively with the feminine.

In a far more aesthetically arresting and conceptually intriguing series, *Incarnation*, Bozic positions individual or paired taxidermied birds within exquisitely detailed stage-like sets she satin drapes patterned with tranquil forest vignettes to massive soup tureens decorated with garlands of flowers and clusters of faux ceramic roses, these antique objects construct a *mise en scene* that is absolutely elite and absolutely artificial. Together, all of these elements force us to consider not only how we have come to control nature, shaping it to our will, but how we have constructed visual paradigms that promote an idealized understanding of nature that has little to do with nature as it is today.

Bozic's images of mounted birds are literally and figuratively models that represent nature not in its original organic state but as a manipulated post-natural construct. Pushed a little further, we can also read these images not only as portraiture of the most morbid kind but as still-life images reminiscent of Dutch death-and-mortality paintings of the 15th and 16th centuries that, in their absolute stillness, suggest the death of nature. (Indeed, the French term for still life is "nature morte," or "dead nature.")

While Bozic's photographs of male figures adorned with floral elements in *Harmonization* represent humanity in consort with nature, *Incarnation* proposes our negative disagreement with it. *Incarnation* is enriched by Bozic's acknowledgment and manipulation of photography's own languages and genres.

But, however seriously we take Bozic's bird images, there is a substantial degree of, well, cartoon kookiness to many of them as well. More witty than ironic, less self-conscious than self-deprecating, these few images are the most successful in the show, for they explode our conception of nature, momentarily, at least, crashing all the paradigms that surround it.