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Catharine Czudej's installation features homemade fountains, cast-resin TV-paintings and stacks of obsolete telephone books. (Michael Benevento Gallery)

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT | ART CRITIC | 21 May 2019

Review: In Catharine Czudej's land of leaky fountains, enter at your own risk

Each of five rooms in a purposefully tatty installation by Catharine Czudej is wallpapered, floor to ceiling, with a stock photo of a bleacher filled with cheering crowds.

On their feet, fists pumped, smiles broad, enthusiasm juiced — the pictured crowds, repeated and sometimes flopped in a printed mirror-image, lend a suitably creepy tone to the New York-based artist's solo L.A. debut. The wallpaper delivers a contrived show of wild support for the artist and her exhibition at Michael Benevento Gallery, just as it applauds our own good sense for having shown up to see it.

That all this popular zeal is faked and its phoniness obvious means little in Trump's America, where barefaced lying is a proven strategy for success and shamelessness is the new norm. Czudej makes no partisan observations in her savvy show, titled with the old John Lennon lyric,



“Imagine All the People;” but that Vietnam-era inverse of a call to arms resonates with the way we live now.

Stacks of telephone books (mostly commercial Yellow Pages) dot the floors, the obsolescence of a paper record for how people might connect a key to our tumultuous, ongoing transition from an industrial to a digital era. Imagine all the people, indeed.

The gallery’s small spaces, laid out in a ring, are linked by garden hoses fueling rudimentary fountains. The basins are made from plastic buckets, the spigots adorned with blank face-masks and pointing fingers fed by sloppy PVC pipes.

Fountains are age-old signs for continuity and life, but these are a desperate, broken-down mess. (Water leaks and puddles all over the floor.) Marcel Duchamp’s “Fountain” from 1917 — that infamous store-bought urinal — gurgles in the work’s conceptual ancestry. Indoor plumbing was once heralded as a popular sign of wondrous modern civilization, but here it has all gone awry.

inally, Czudej installed two groups of nominal paintings.

Eight are white dry-erase boards, the instructional kind found in classrooms and corporate boardrooms. Covered in smeared and illegible diagrams, charts, alphabets and lists, they evoke gesturally obliterated memories of paintings. Her work’s elegant eulogy to inevitable ruin and decay has been pushed over a no-return cliff.

Eleven are crummy black or blue panels. Their repeated rectangular shape slowly reveals itself to be a sleek, flat-screen television here memorialized in lumpy cast-resin.

It’s worth quoting Abstract Expressionist painter Ad Reinhardt, whose black and blue geometric abstractions from the 1950s are the clear reference. His dream of “a pure, abstract, non-objective, timeless, spaceless, changeless, relationless, disinterested painting — an object that is self-conscious (no unconsciousness), ideal, transcendent, aware of no thing but art” has come undone. How could a post-World War II ideal not be swamped by a society in which perpetual war holds sway?

Tellingly, a sculpture near the entry is made from a plastic pair of toy android boxers standing atop a pedestal.

The original children’s game of Rock ’Em Sock ’Em Robots was won when one player knocked the head off the opponent; but these two are unplugged — out of order. I wouldn’t call Czudej’s work cynical, but I would describe it as harsh yet sober — necessarily so, given the current state of things.