

MICROCOSMICAL

BY

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The Thesis Committee for NATHAN HOFFMAN certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

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Microcosmical  
Nathan Hoffman

There comes a point where I feel too comfortable in my surroundings, where I know what's around the corner at my every turn. I become paralyzed in monotony. I feel the need to travel to a foreign place and become lost in exoticism in order to rediscover my inspirations and self. In the past few years I have taken trips to specific places that put me under a kind of spell where I feel adrift in another world, where time and reality are transformed. Doing so awakens my spirit that yearns to travel and explore, to experience something new, strange and beautiful. I feel a revival of the self.

*Microcosmical* is an attempt to create an exotic fantastical enigmatic landscape that allows the viewer to leave behind the routine of everyday life and be lost in the moment. The installation consists of seven tubular shapes that resemble various parts of the human anatomy, along with numerous tiny barnacle and starfish-like pieces that inhabit the space from floor to ceiling. Sounds, smells, fog, and colored lights are also utilized to enrich the environment of the gallery.

The installation provides a place of wonder and awe, life, death, and disease. I want my viewer to be taken to a place of uncertainty where their curiosity enables them to make connections between the pieces and their own lives. When the viewer leaves the installation they will reenter the everyday world, but will take with them an experience out of the mundane.

Microcosmical  
Nathan Hoffman

My work has always grown from a reverence for the landscape, natural phenomena, and the notion of creation. I am always finding new forms that embody my energy and emotions throughout nature. The process I work with is in tune with how the outside world is created and transformed: by water, pressure, heat, chance, repetition, and time.

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I want viewers to become immersed in the unusual sights, smells, and sounds, to be overtaken by curiosity and awe. The forms and sounds I present are purposefully familiar yet ambiguous in order for the viewer to project their own interpretations and connections onto the work. Therefore, each person will have a different experience of the installation.

My background in the sciences has influenced my microscopic and macroscopic tendencies. Matter behaves and is organized in certain ways regardless of scale. A solar

system is organized similar to an atom. Bacteria in a petri dish will grow into miniature cities organized like ones of our own. That change in scale is reflected through the crystalized salt cubes and the cube-like shape of the gallery, as well as the minute barnacles and the larger tubes. Taking a step back and seeing our planet miles into the air puts everything into perspective; we are just a film on a larger body.

I strive to make work that allows the viewer to contemplate the mystery of creation. I feel that leaving the presence of my hand diminishes the mystery and awe as if it was taken directly from nature, or as if it was created all on its own. In my art making process I allow myself to play with the work as I create, physically and mentally. In my work each piece has a slightly different gesture, texture, or posture to it. I find the differences between the pieces add to their individual personas in the collective whole. There is no one true, perfect form for each of the objects, but an infinite number of variations. Through repetition I explore the different outcomes that result from my inability to repeat a gesture perfectly. I intentionally make multiples in different sizes and shapes in order for slight variations to occur, which can eventually lead to another form completely.

I imagine shrinking myself down and travelling through the exotic landscapes as I am peering down into the work, my face an inch from the surface. I encourage my viewer to immerse themselves into the tiny cracks and crevices.

Many different aspects of the show coalesce to evoke many different meanings. The paper-clay barnacle-like forms on the wall are made to represent a mass of cells, an infestation, a murmur, a swarm, or constellations in space. They inhabit every corner of the gallery walls, some are stuck on the ceiling, others reside in the ventilation ducts, and a few manage to cling onto the gallery glass door, as life is not easily contained.

The colored lights, along with fog, form an atmosphere similar to nebulas, and take on characteristics of the aurora borealis. There are larger tube forms that emit a gas, or fog into the atmosphere, much like every living creature secretes some byproduct, toxic or not. The tubes resemble the anatomy of the human body, from the phallus to the colon, from giant fingers to legs. Hundreds of pounds of salt are used to form mounds from which the tubes and creatures emerge, and give off a brackish odor. The addition of food dyes in the salt provides a metallic finish that leeches over time; in places it

resembles a furry fungus. The overall piece is a landscape where the viewer is able to walk through the space and investigate each of the pieces on an individual level up close, and is able to step back and view the installation as a whole.

In addition to the main forms, there are several smaller starfish-like pieces made of clay. I am interested in clay for its malleability and rawness. In the starfish-like pieces I use a needlepoint tool to create the porous texture of the clay. It is an obsessive process that becomes methodical and meditative. Various raku glazes carried out the finishing touch to the clay starfish pieces. The transformative qualities and unpredictability of raku adds to the uniqueness of each piece, as no two are the same. The pieces are heated until they are glowing red hot, and then transferred to a reduction chamber in which the oxygen in the glaze is pulled out, and brilliant metallic flashes of color ensue.

The arrangement of the starfish in the space is meant to provoke a sense of exploration and curiosity. The little creatures sprawl out from a larger tube's mouth, and begin crawling around. Some are frozen in a crystallized salt pool, showing the fragility and beauty of life and death. Others crawl around on larger tube forms and teeter on the wood trim near the floor, a way of feeling out their surroundings. Some have formed growths and lost their color, having deadness about them. What they are searching for is an open-ended question I want my viewer to contemplate.

Many of the forms I create involve the accumulation of many layers over time. The larger tubes are made with chicken wire wrapped in plaster bandages, and covered with layers of colored beeswax. In order to work larger I had to come up with a quick method with light yet strong materials. The hexagonal shape of the chicken wire relates to the chambers in beehives. A simple, strong, lightweight design found throughout the natural world. On some areas of the tubes I grew fungus-like shapes by adding twenty to over one hundred layers of beeswax. The forms grow slowly, layer by layer, and over time they accumulate into a perplexing life-like state. The sweet aroma of the wax, in addition to the bright colors infused in it, entices the viewer to pick off a piece and eat it. However, bright colors in nature are also a warning sign to stay away, touching or eating could be deadly.

The element of sound in the installation was added to provide another layer of

mystery to the senses. The sounds played in the installation are taken from everyday life; the chirping of birds, crickets, and cicadas, many different types of squeaks and blurts from doors and chairs in buildings that are categorized as background noise. There are many sounds hidden in fragments of time that we cannot decipher. Only when we take the time to listen can we hear the rest. Slowing down the sound is a way of magnifying it, the tiny wavelengths of sound become longer, and thus we can hear more of them. A door squeak may take half a second, and all we hear is metal grinding on metal. Take that half a second and draw it out to three or four seconds and it can become a melody of horns, or a whale in the ocean. The sound of crickets transform into a jungle like atmosphere. Birds become monstrous beasts. I want the sounds to take my viewer to an unknown place.

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