

## Wondrous Strange @ SFMOMA Artists Gallery

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Katherine Westerhout, "Mishkan Yisroel Synagogue", 2007, archival pigment print, 43 x 52"

Before museums, knowledge of the world beyond our immediate reach could be found in cabinets of curiosities – rooms that literally housed collections of everything under the sun, from natural history and ethnographic artifacts to archeological fragments and antiques. These early attempts to collect and categorize, which began during the Renaissance and remained the province of elites for some time to come, were designed to elucidate and impress. That such

practices became a common activity, engaged in by legions of collectors everywhere, can be adduced by the widely variegated impact they had on 20<sup>th</sup> century art.

*Wondrous Strange: a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Cabinet of Curiosities* pays homage to these traditions. It contains all the things you would expect (boxes and bottles of artist-scavenged curios), but it also pulls in things not generally seen in this realm, such as painting, ceramic sculpture and tapestry. In all, 21 artists of disparate persuasions are represented in this sprawling, category-defying show. Most express, in some elegiac fashion, the human impulse to excavate and order.

George Pfau's drawing on canvas, *Represented In-Flus Bodies, Cyborg Architecture, Geographic Enclosures*, tickles the optical nerve, too. It reads like a dizzying treasure map, with layers of lines and skeletal shapes that appear to have arrived through some combination of stenciling and photolithography. Embedded into the picture at various depths, these forms, which are obscured with hand-painted gestural marks, trace an archeological journey that has no beginning or end.

Other works appeal to antiquarian impulses through more direct means, sometimes via obvious art-historical references. Jeremiah Jenkins' wood block print of the letter 'G', repeated at varying degrees of opacity on the pages of a 6-inch thick book, has a distinct Warholian ring. Michele Muennig's surrealist paintings of clocks amidst icebergs issue an environmental warning through Dali-esque imagery. Elsewhere, objects and curios are deployed in settings ranging from boxes and bottles to hand-made cabinets to wall-sized multi-media installations that mix objects both fabricated and found.



George Pfau, "Represented In-Flus Bodies, Cyborg Architecture, Geographic Enclosures", 2009, mixed media, 72 x 48"

As anyone who's arranged something even as simple as a seashell collection well knows, ordering of this sort is all about displaying tastes, preferences and world views – and looking to the past for sustenance in an uncertain present. *Wondrous Strange*, a show of wildly varying quality, is but the latest installment on a long continuum of such investigations.

–DAVID M. ROTH

*Wondrous Strange: a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Cabinet of Curiosities @ SFMOMA Artists Gallery*, Fort Mason, through August 28, 2010.

The show also includes works by Kathy Aoki, Agelio Batle, JoAnn Biagini, Coup D' Etat, Kirk Crippens, Shenny Cruces, Leslie Fierman Grunditz, Jesse Hazlip, Amit Greenberg, Misako Inaoka, Jeremiah Jenkins, Philip Ringler, Mike Shine, Bryan Tedrick, Brandon Truscott and Claire Pasquier.

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This post was written by:

David Roth - who has written 87 posts on SquareCylinder.com.

Contact the author: [art@squarecylinder.com](mailto:art@squarecylinder.com)