Idyllic creations revive joy and wit of '60s and '70s happenings

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By Mary Thomas, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Last one to smile in "The Happiest Day" is an indefatigable curmudgeon. The exhibition of video-based art by Hilary Harp and Suzie Silver at Pittsburgh Filmmakers pays homage to 1960s and '70s performance art, but its tongue-in-cheek style and snazzy presentation steal the show.

The artists have produced re-enactments of early performances, but you don't have to be familiar with those to enjoy the present work, both because it has a personality of its own and because many of the performance pieces themselves included references long part of the cultural canon.

Having become acquainted with such Happenings and other performances mainly through "grainy photographs," the artists felt a loss for a time of joie de vivre, and the innocence and spontaneity that accompanied it. They also realized that their response was in part fueled by a romanticization of the past that has periodically characterized other literary and artistic expression.

While stating that this series "conflates a remembrance of a lost bohemia with those depictions of a lost Arcadia one often finds in paintings and poems," Harp and Silver further acknowledge that the original performances may have embraced "similar longings."

Their Arcadia is constructed -- a lavish, richly detailed, colorful digital melange of actual scenery, studio shots, and drawn and found images and objects. When the camera pans this built place and time -- zooming in on scenarios, leaving and revisiting them in soap opera format -- it's like time travel with a buzz.
wreathed figures gesture, laugh and share wine while plucking food from a rich bounty laid over the body of a nude woman they're seated around. In another, two men bind and blindfold a third in a forest and push him to the ground before plunging a knife into the stomach of a goat suspended in a nearby tree and pulling out its entrails. Elsewhere, a bevy of nude nymphs rises out of a deep pool at the base of a waterfall to enact a sensual midsummer's dance.

Bacchanal, sacrifice, goddesses: The vignettes could be straight out of Bulfinch's Mythology or at least Watteau. But idealized or romanticized they're not. The performers are students and friends of the artists, not trained actors, who bring a youthful, unstudied casualness to the screen that, ironically, translates into a reintroduction of the innocence presumed lost. This feeling is nourished by animation that suggests children's books or 19th-century illustration, most of which is drawn from the natural world which itself conveys a sense of the ideologically pristine if not the transcendental.

The feast upon the virgin is set on a sandy beach against a backdrop of graphic, cartoon-like floating clouds and waves through which a dolphin happily leaps and a whale glides. The bloody organs that the men pull from the somewhat suspicious carcass disassemble into shreds of red cellophane. And the nymphs, their variety of physiques decrying an exclusionary ideal, actually wear flesh-toned body stockings embellished with exaggerated crimson nipples and black patches of pubic hair that denature eroticism by satirically exposing its symbols.

These sequences reference, respectively, Swiss Surrealist Meret Oppenheim, Viennese Action artist Hermann Nitsch, and American feminist Carolee Schneemann. But certainly they also reflect their creators' wit and opinion.

One episode that cites an early dominant figure on the New York scene, Vito Acconci, depicts Narcissus of Greek mythology, enamored of his reflected image and surrounded by symbol-laden plants such as an anthirium with phallic spadix, sexually emblematic orchids, a hallucinogenic fly agaric mushroom, and the bulb that bears his name. Could it be a send-up of the performance for which Acconci is most well known -- wherein he masturbated beneath a ramp while visitors to his Sonnabend Gallery exhibition walked overhead -- and subsequently of the ego that produced it?

The artists, both Carnegie Mellon University faculty, also present individual re-enactments within boxes or gilded frames, calling to mind, among others, museum dioramas, Joseph Cornell, Victorian shadow boxes and Old Masters. Their plasma screens embedded within planes of two- and three-dimensional flora and fauna, the miniature motion-filled worlds materialize somewhat like daydreams lapsed into on a warm afternoon. Improbable but
possible, they exist in the realm of imagination that lies just outside of vision.

**Indie cartoons**

Complementing the exhibition are two independent cartoon programs that Harp and Silver organized. Why? In a period when there is "so much cruelty," Silver says, they wanted to show films that "create a sense of wonder and magic and even sweetness sometimes."


Next Saturday features episodes of "The Little Mole," Czech animation that's the hit of Europe (all ages). Both begin at 2 p.m. in the Melwood Screening Room. Admission is $3.

"Happiest" continues through Feb. 13 at 477 Melwood Ave., North Oakland. Admission is free. Hours are noon to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday and during film screenings. For information, call 412-681-5449 or visit [www.pghfilmmakers.org](http://www.pghfilmmakers.org).

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