

## Making it personal

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At its best, sculptural installation creates an alternate reality with an effectiveness that few visual art forms can match. It allows a viewer to enter a work of art and become, for a little while, part of a world entirely controlled by the artist.

**Mindy Rose Schwartz's** installation "On T.V." does just that. As part of "Work," a group show exploring the mundane lives of artists who work day jobs to support their art, Schwartz has re-created her living room. The room contains an old couch, chairs, bowls of real popcorn and candy, kitschy art on the walls and a TV set that is the focus of the room. Posted alongside is a listing of the TV shows she watches. On Monday, it's "That '70s Show" and "Ally McBeal." On Wednesday, it's "Angel" and "The Simpsons." As the viewer sits down on Schwartz's comfy old couch, she finds herself watching the artist watching TV.

The piece is fraught with flash points for artists and would-be artists, exposing the dirty little secret that most artists don't rush home from their jobs to make art, but are more likely to collapse in front of the TV. Schwartz doesn't dress up her viewing habits, either, letting us know that after a day of teaching art in the Chicago public schools, all the culture she's up for is "Who Wants to Marry a Multimillionaire?"

Rounding the corner in Gallery 312 as I approached this installation, I expected to see videotapes of Schwartz's favorite shows. Instead, the view of her viewing them is a surprise, even a shock, and a satisfying one at that. Much more engaging than the predictable plot turns of commercial TV is the artist's implacable demeanor as she eats her dinner from a plate in her lap and stares at the television that chirps animatedly in the background, its desperate laugh track raising neither smile nor chuckle from the mesmerized, exhausted Schwartz.

This work is essentially a self-portrait rendered in figurative realism. It is realistic the way a Philip Pearlstein painting is realistic, reproducing not a dramatic moment or an idealized composite but the dreary real-time life of the artist. As such it is the least romantic, most honest and therefore most interesting self-portrait I have seen in a long time.

Also in "Work" is "Artworld," an installation by **Mike O'Shea** that uses model trains as a metaphor for his immersion in the self-absorbed world of art. One end of the gallery is given over to an elaborate working railroad set up with box cars bearing art magazine names instead of those of the usual haulable commodities and rows of model houses fashioned out of gallery opening invitations.

O'Shea's model train environment is self-contained, much like the insular world of the professional artist. By miniaturizing his world and comparing it to a child's toy, O'Shea sets up a humorously provocative comparison between the art world and the fascinating but monotonous world of model railroads. Both worlds, he seems to say, require effort to maintain, but neither one goes anywhere.

Unlike the self-referential installations in "Work," **Cristina Iglesias'** "Vegetation Rooms" seeks to take the viewer out of the gallery for a moment and into a made-up environment that blends nature with industrial materials. Iglesias creates 8-foot-tall screens into which she casts natural materials like rose vines, brambles, leaves and flowers, and then sets these undulating walls in close proximity to one another to form cavelike spaces.

The effect is at once magical and claustrophobic. As we enter, our bodies are pressed close against walls that bear the shapes of nature, as if we're about to be crushed inside a garden hedge or smothered by an underwater cave.

The moment lasts only briefly, barely enough time for the dread of close spaces to kick in, before the viewer is expelled once again into the bright lights, right angles and white walls of the gallery. Out there, in that rational airy space, photographs representing architectural spaces hang on the wall. They're part of the installation but mostly they work as reminders that we are back in a white cube gallery space.

The effect of these vegetation rooms is that of being suddenly enclosed by nature in an unnatural environment, an experience that is both exciting and strange. To experience the whole of this work is to feel both disappointment and relief at re-entering the familiar convention of the art gallery.

The tiny bronze sculptures of **Sharon Louden** are not presented as an installation but as a collection of separate artworks. Because of their size, though, 3 or 4 inches in height, and the way they are arranged around the gallery floor, this work only makes sense when viewed as part of a larger whole.

At first, individually, these pieces offer little of interest, looking like clumps of extruded metal or handfuls of licorice. The viewer must get down on all fours even to see them properly, an act of physical exertion that requires more energy than most art viewing does. Once that commitment is made, though, this odd little grouping compels the viewer to scan the space and see it as a whole. It begins to look like towns on prairie landscape viewed from an airplane or oil wells on Texas flatland. Obdurate at first, like the material from which it is made, this work grew on me, and I found myself liking it more as I lingered over it.