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A Tailored Garden in Full Flower at Numark

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There's one question that leaps to mind upon seeing "The Motley Tails," Sharon Louden's quirky extravagance of an installation at Numark: Exactly how many My Little Ponies died for this?

Turns out the stuff of Louden's exhibition wasn't shorn from Hasbro's horse figurines, though the resemblance is awfully strong. To make her room-size work, New York-based Louden collected hundreds of thousands of feet of micro-filament fishing line in all manner of Easter egg colors. Long faux tresses in varied degrees of curl, bounce and gloss are fastened into ponytail-like bundles, some as long as your body, and suspended from the ceiling at varying heights. Since they're grouped in random clumps, here a dense patch of tails, there farther apart, visitors can wander around, under and beside them, brushing past their plastic tentacles. "The Motley Tails" could almost pass for a room-size playpen.

Yet as I meandered, ducked, and shimmied past the hanging tails, the idea of a three-dimensional interactive landscape came to mind. Since most of the plastic knots skim the floor, they appear to grow up like trees; Louden's palette, heavy on greens and yellows, furthers the conceit. "The Motley Tails" could be a picturesque garden brought indoors for the winter.

Back in the 18th century, Britain's upper classes went gaga for a new kind of garden. Popular landscape architects such as William Kent snubbed their noses at French-style horticultural symmetry—the kind of ordered plantings you see at Versailles. Rather than master nature with applied rationality, Kent and company replicated nature's inconsistencies and even one-upped her wildness: They calculated to appear uncalculated.

Just as a stroll became an idyll in the transformed 18th-century gar-



den, so the winter-chilled urbanite can indulge in Louden's fantasy space. Visitors may enjoy her piece from within or admire it from a distance. The long view is my favorite: Taking in the room as a panorama reveals thematic surprises. A violent strand of red runs through a rear tail, as if murder were one of many intrigues woven into this make-believe world.

When Kent drew up his garden plans, he based them not on the parks he visited throughout Europe, as one might expect. Instead, he drew on the artist's idealized version of nature: the landscape painting. He brought the great landscapes of the baroque—painted by Claude Lorrain, Nicolas Poussin and others—into three dimensions. His choice of shrubs in varying hues mimicked painterly effects of light and shadow.

Louden does much the same

thing. She interweaves variously colored strands to create highlights and lowlights that lend her tails depth and dimension. Likewise, her foundation is painting—her own.

A handful of wood panel works from the series "The Linger," also on view here, depict short, sinewy gestures that are the source forms for her installation. "The Motley Tails" picks out those markings and extends them into sinuous lines of microfilament. Like a picturesque garden, the work has a light touch and a conceptually rich underpinning.