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Alison Siegel & Pamela Sabroso

"STRANGER TOGETHER"
HELLER GALLERY
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Alison Siegel and Pamela Sabroso's exhibition "Stranger Together" is a riot of color, texture, and form. The works are both singular and part of a greater whole, in dialogue with one another but able to stand as individual statements. To experience them as a grouping is an indulgent, gluttonous treat.

The work asserts a maximalist decorative aesthetic only possible today thanks to the work of the artists who pioneered the Pattern and Decoration Movement in the mid-1970s to late 1980s. These artists, including leader Miriam Schapiro (1923–2015) and ceramicist Betty Woodman (1930–2018), embraced the ornamentation that had been marginalized and "feminized" by the mainstream art machine. They rejected the patriarchal dominance of hard-edged, geometric abstraction.

Siegel and Sabroso's work builds on this love of ornament but is less in keeping with the iconography of the Pattern and Decoration Movement, which focused on floral patterns and similar indicators of domesticity. "Stranger Together" builds upon a more recent artistic aesthetic. "Sloppy craft"—coined by artist Anne Wilson in 2007 in response to the work of Josh Faught—refers to an approach that emphasizes concept over advanced skill and process over refined product, calling into question revered traditional principles of craft. Sloppy craft does not necessarily mean that the artist in question does not have fine craft skills. Rather, it can be used as an approach to explore issues of labor and production—such as the changing landscape of craft-based education, in which fewer academic programs teach fine craft skills—or as an attempt to invigorate work with a sense of playfulness and creativity. (See Liz Logan's discussion of this term in the November 2015 edition of *American Craft*.) Siegel and Sabroso's work taps into the creative freedom and playfulness espoused by sloppy craft, while also—as the gallery suggests—pulling from glass's own history of experimentation during the early days of the Studio Glass movement and the tumultuous Age of Aquarius.

Siegel and Sabroso's work is labor-intensive and the result of a long process that the artists themselves innovated, a complex regimen of blowing, hot sculpting, mold-making, lampworking, coldworking, and assemblage. Their process is a collaboration. Each artist makes individual parts that they construct into a whole,

often working independently on the same piece, adding or removing what the other has done in an aesthetic conversation with each other.

At first glance, their glass work has a kinship to the “dysfunctional” ceramic vessels of Takuro Kuwata or Misha Kahn’s scavenged assemblages (like Kahn, Siegel and Sabroso collected debris from Dead Horse Bay in Brooklyn for their most recent work). Their fiber works—which are interesting in their own right, although not as refined as the glass vessels—contain an element of the fiber sculptures of Sarah Zapata. Process is mysterious, not unlike in the cryptic forms of Thaddeus Wolfe (with whom Sabroso was in a lengthy relationship).

I introduce these connections with other young emerging artists because “Stranger Together” feels incredibly current and necessary to our times. While we are no longer in an age of postmodernism, there are aesthetic markers from that period that feel relevant today, such as an abundance of color and an infiltration of humor. In a time marked by rising nationalism, the rise of Postmodernism after the militarism of World War II feels quite relatable. The current sociopolitical climate has led to rampant anxiety, and as citizens seek out activist roles in greater numbers, it’s important for the art world to document the moment, both in works that comment directly and in works that provide release. In “Stranger Together,” Siegel and Sabroso achieve the latter.

Humor is embedded in the work. The titles include many produce-inspired witticisms, such as *Rotten Potato*, *Scaly Romanesco*, and *Green Prickly Crabs*, directly referencing the fruits and vegetables the duo uses to make the molds for their exuberant, vessel-based forms. If you look closely, there is a full range of bulbous, projecting, and tubular forms, but also shells, crab claws, and mushrooms, both real and in glass, resulting in assemblages of Earth and an alien world. It’s as if the Blob of early science fiction had consumed various sea creatures that now protrude from its globular body, giving its form a

strangely anthropomorphic quality without referencing an actual being. The vessels occupy a world both living and dead. A favorite, *Rotten Potato*, is a primordial concoction that might exist in the deepest recesses of the sea. A conglomeration of creatures likely to be found in an ocean reef, awkwardly propped up on legs, it looks as if it might scuttle away at any moment to disappear again within the depths.

As stated on Heller Gallery’s website: “Siegel and Sabroso started collaborating in 2014 and found that working together allowed more playfulness and risk-taking into their artistic practices. Their collaborations are much less a straight line between idea and outcome and more of a

meandering path where ideas grow into forms through drawings, discussions, and the physical action of making together.”

This, the first major product of their collaboration, is a fruitful one, successful for so many of the reasons stated above, but not least because of the joy their creature-objects produce in their viewers.

Brooklyn-based curator, writer, art historian, and regular magazine contributor SAMAMTHA DE TILLIO is assistant curator at the Museum of Arts and Design, where she is part of the curatorial team behind the exhibition “Derrick Adams: Sanctuary.” De Tillio is also curator of the just-opened project “Unpacking the Green Book: Travel and Segregation in Jim Crow America.”

Rotten Potato, 2017. Glass.
H 12, W 8, D 6 in.

