

Art Review: The Surrealist Carnival of Life Revealed by Sydney Albertini through Stuffed Art and Costumes

May 18, 2013

by Mike Solomon

“Sydney Albertini: Stuffed and Other Feelings” at ILLE Arts

On view through June 3, 2013

Humor, idiosyncratic craft and self-awareness are among the best qualities an artist can have. In the “Stuffed and Other Feelings” exhibit at ILLE Arts in Amagansett, Sydney Albertini clearly demonstrates that she has them all, in spades.

This is an artist who knows that we are all freaks of one kind or another, and her lighthearted view of the self is one of most pleasurable and useful things I have taken away from any recent exhibition. To me, being able to laugh at oneself is a sure sign of spiritual maturity, and the way that capacity is articulated through Albertini’s unique use of handmade costumes and performance is just absolutely charming.



Stuffed by Sydney Albertini.

The show is comprised of sewn fabric works, costumes, photographs, embroideries and a video. The

major freestanding fabric piece, *Stuffed*, is a ramshackle stack of large oddly shaped aqua colored pillows that takes up most of the front gallery. I would describe it as a soft John Chamberlain sculpture, or a huge, three-dimensional Paul Klee watercolor. Also in the front room are little kitchen-wall signs, a takeoff on the folksy domestic genre. Together they are titled *Gratitude* and consist of 18 little (6" x 8") embroideries, each one displaying the words "Thank you" or "Merci". These are little gems of design, color and playfulness.

There are two costumes in the show: *Love* and *Animal*. The artist likes to display the costumes but also likes to wear them, so there are ancillary works, photographs and videos that show her wearing them. These are probably the most complete of all her works, actually, combining as they do the costume fulfilling its function by being worn by the artist in various acts and poses.

There is always a vestigial aspect to the costume designs, with growths of tentacles, bumps, knobs and other protrusions providing the main elements of pieces that look like stuffed creatures one might win at a Surrealist carnival. These soft monsters made with fluffy materials like sweat shirt fabric are branded by sophisticated yet offbeat color combinations made with organic dyes. All of this makes them as lovable as any Sesame Street Muppet.



Photograph of *Animal* by Sydney Albertini.

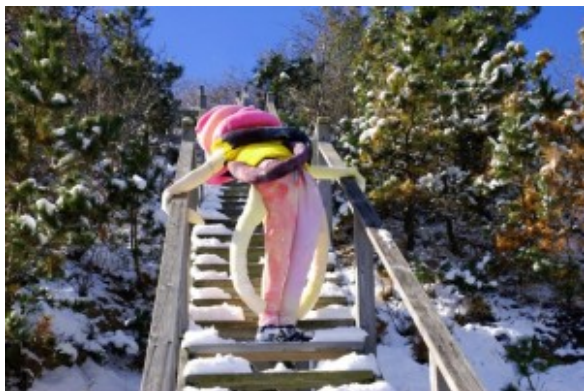
The large 3D photographs of *Animal* (what I like to call the wedding cake monster) shows the costume (which is on display nearby) made up of stacked rings of various fabrics, with a white head punctuated only by big turquoise lips with big, white, clunky monster teeth. The bottom rung of the costume consists of a sort of miniskirt fringed with brown mop ropes. In the photos, Albertini has donned this creature, which covers her to mid-thigh and then poses in her unique style, which is to say, in a sort of dorky nut-ball yet oddly athletic way, by sticking one foot in the air or squatting as if she were doing karate. When one sees the image through the 3D glasses she provides, a great transformation takes place, as space revolves around her and she seems to be moving a little bit.

In the short video (shot by fellow artist Peter Dayton) she wears the costume *Love*: a pink, yellow,

lavender, white and black stack of tentacles that wrap around the body from head to waist, above a pair of harlequinesque leggings. The monster “Love” walks up a very long steep stairway from the bay with a kind of fragmented stop and start timing that would make Chaplin jealous. She gets to the top and crosses her arms, as if to say, “Well, here I am!”

The stairs are covered in snow and we see the fog extending out over the water beyond the top of the frame. It seems that the creature has just emerged from the water or from some alien spacecraft that has landed in the Sound. The whole presentation says to me, “I am a monster, a weirdo. I am an alien but lovable and am trying to be normal. So *how am I doing so far?*”

One of the indelible images of the artist’s previous show at ILLE Arts was in a series of photographs of her wearing one of her monster costumes. In one scene, the monster is out on a quiet suburban street checking the mail box. It is this kind of humor, used to comment about normalcy and alienation, that makes her work so appealing, approachable and yet quite seriously psychological. There’s nothing trite about it as there is a kind of odd sadness and loneliness behind the humor. As in all comedy, perfect execution is everything and she always seems to get it just right.



Movie still from “Love” by Sydney Albertini.

It just so happened that the morning of the day Albertini’s show opened, I turned on “CBS Saturday” and saw a wonderful segment on Isabella Rossellini, who has gone back to school to get a degree based on her lifelong interest in animals and their behavior. Her current interest is in mothering, and she has made a series of short films of herself done up in various animal and insect costumes, acting out various kinds of animal mothering behavior. The costumes and performances were uncannily evocative of Albertini’s work, so Isabella ... if you are out there somewhere, you have to come and see Albertini’s show! You would love it! If I knew the right animal call or alien monster squeak, I would surely use it to call you to Amagansett. This is one show that is not to be missed.

-Mike Solomon

BASIC INFO: “Stuffed and Other Feelings: Sydney Albertini” remains on view through June 3. The gallery is located at 216a Main Street, Amagansett, NY 11930. www.illearts.com

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