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Yin and Yang of Feminine Critique

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A pair of shows on view this month offer a rare opportunity to witness two contemporary female artists wrestling with gender and womanhood. Their projects expose the strengths and shortcomings of 21st-century approaches to feminism.

At Conner Contemporary, the Swede Maria Friberg exemplifies detachment in her examination of gender and social constructs. Her strategy offers the advantage of reaching across gender lines, yet its broad appeal dilutes a feminist agenda. By contrast, area artist Melissa Ichiuji's fabric and nylon sculptures on view at Irvine Contemporary engage in-your-face taboos at the cost of subtlety.

For many years now, Friberg has photographed men clad in their uniform of power, the business suit. Past projects included floating suit-clad men in crystalline swimming pools as if they were oversize babies returned to the womb. Friberg's current show, "Embedded," again examines the suited male. Centering on a compelling three-channel video work of the same title, the exhibition finds men in suits enacting what looks to be a birthing ritual, one with aspects both mammalian and arthropod.



Each monitor shows a single bed shot against a stark white background and piled high with mussed-up white sheets. Ever so slowly, heads and bodies emerge from the covers. First, a closely cropped male head, with eyes clamped shut, peeks out. The man's suit-clad body follows, minus a shirt and socks. The figure wiggles almost imperceptibly as he makes his way off the bed and out of the camera frame. Moving at a painstaking pace, each man seems oblivious to his companions.

Friberg's men suggest butterflies exiting chrysalides, or wriggling newborn mice. Her film's excruciatingly slow motion intimates that we're watching nature's work captured by a naturalist's camera. Three, four or even five men emerge from a given bed before the screen goes white and another cycle of birth begins.

"Embedded" pays sentimental tribute to the vulnerability of these anonymous men. That Friberg's men are born wearing suits suggests a certain inevitability to their costume, that it was society or genetic code that outfitted them. It's a sympathetic portrait executed with considerable restraint.

Not so Ichiuji's.

Her work seems calculated -- sometimes too much so -- to provoke. Where Friberg shoots from a documentarian's distance, Ichiuji engages visceral womanhood with her cotton-stuffed figures made from

pantyhose and fabric. The figures' sexuality and sexual anxiety lend her work a certain power, but their excesses in both number -- again, Irvine overfills a show -- and high-key emotion risk alienating her audience.

Ichiuji's figures are portraits not of individuals but of ideas. In lieu of using identifiable facial features, the artist relies on pose, gesture and the occasional sewed-on ponytail or doll's eyeball to give her figures expression.

The scenes they enact might have been lifted from a psychoanalytic text, essentially a dirty laundry list of pubescent anxieties with some transgressive sex thrown in. A small group of prepubescent girls trying male genitalia on for size illustrates Penis Envy 101. Another tableaux finds a girl killing a rabbit; the blood spattered on the pedestal below the animal and between the girl's legs seems to equate her reproductive capacity with her destructive powers. Yet another figure finds a girl with scars running down her arm.

No celebratory femininity here. In many regards, this is victim art: women as victims of society and of their own bodies. That Ichiuji gives form to deep anxieties of womanhood is both a compelling cause and a dangerous one. It's an uneasy moment when a woman artist promulgates fantasies of devouring and destructive female sexuality.