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John Prieto | The Denver Post
"Capricho 2 (umbrella)." by Julie Poitras Santos,
is on display at Rocky Mountain College of Art +
Design's Steele Gallery.

By Kyle MacMillan Denver Post Fine Arts Critic

Audacious installations |

Every so often, an art exhibition comes along that immediately stands out and sparks a jolt of excitement.

Just such an offering opened this week in the Philip J. Steele Gallery at the Rocky Mountain College of Art + Design.

Unhelpfully called "Scenario," a generic title that says little about the selections, it features terrific installations by three artists with past or present ties to the Front Range.

Their works could hardly be more different in look, feel and intent, yet the three are linked by a commitment to originality, audacity and a total contemporary feel.

Rather than just trying to make good or even very good art, these artists are boldly attempting to create works that engage a broader artistic dialogue and would be worthy of display in the most demanding settings.

Gallery director Lisa Spivak deserves kudos for

> See "SCENARIO" on 6FF

The installation's centerpiece is "Arboreus stativus," a breathtaking, 10-foot-tall tree sculpture. The main body of the work is an actual bare tree, onto which Fetterman-Mulvey has attached hundreds of porcelain maple leaves.

< "Scenario" from IFF

bringing these first-rate creators together and giving them the space and, perhaps more important, the freedom to create such daring, large-scale works.

If there is a downside to "Scenario," it is the gallery itself — rooms in the college's Mary Harris Auditorium that have been recently converted to twin display spaces.

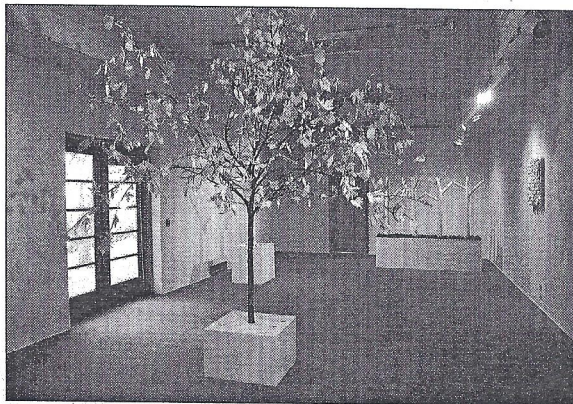
Their size and configuration work well enough, but the worn carpeting detracts from the art. With just a few improvements, these could be accommodating spaces that would enhance rather than hurt the work shown in them.

These three installations are so compelling, though, that they easily overcome the handicaps of the venue, especially a striking group of five ceramic works by Mia Fetterman-Mulvey, a member of the University of Denver art faculty.

The installation's centerpiece is "Arboreus stativus," a breathtaking, 10-foot-tall tree sculpture. The main body of the work is an actual bare tree, onto which Fetterman-Mulvey has attached hundreds of porcelain maple leaves.

This conceptual piece offers a fascinating, graceful intersection of the natural and man-made, with the slipcast, white leaves and real tree combining to create a visual wonder.

Added touches include a few porcelain leaves that Fetterman-Mulvey has placed at the base of the tree as though they had fallen off, and her use of strips of white cloth to attach the leaves, a simple gesture that totally fits the feel of the piece.



Photos by John Prieto | The Denver Post

The tree sculpture is "Arboreus stativus," by Mia Fetterman-Mulvey. Porcelain, found object.

In a similar vein is "Apis mellifera," a smaller piece with a cast-porcelain tree trunk and its few stubby branches as the main component. Handsomely draped around one branch and scattered over the base are a series of acorns, which offer another fanciful mix of the natural and man-made.

The caps of the acorns are real ones that Fetterman-Mulvey has gathered and carefully attached to the nut portions of the acorns, which she has cast in the same slipcast white porcelain as the leaves. The result is nearly as captivating as her tree.

Julie Poitras Santos, who earned her master of fine arts degree from the University of Colorado at Boulder in 2000 and now lives in Barcelona, explores the macabre world of Francisco de Goya in a wonder-

fully inventive black-and-white installation.

She has created a three-dimensional evocation of the netherworld of bats, goblins and other creatures that appear in Goya's 1777 print series, "Caprichos," especially the celebrated scene, "The Sleep of

Reason Produces Monsters."

Black strings radiating to the floor from a white-streaked black umbrella mounted on the rear wall floor draw visitors into the installation and help bring together the varied parts into a unified whole as visitors duck under and step over them.

Other elements include two white witches' brooms that jut from the wall, felt and paper silhouettes of monsters and vague figures and doll-house-sized paper chairs and beds that cling to the ceiling like helium balloons that have slipped free, an allusion reinforced by the black strings hanging from them.

If Goya's "Caprichos" were ever turned into a theatrical offering, this installation might be the ideal set. Rather than being scary, it offers more what might be called gentle creepiness.

Before Carrie Olson left Colorado last year — first for a residency and then a teaching position at Denison University in Granville, Ohio — she could well have been the Front Range's most intellectually adventurous conceptual artist.



Indeed, some people might walk past the two sections of her installations in this show, not even realizing they are artworks. They look more like displays in a store or booths in a trade show, and that's exactly what Olson intends.

Delving into the dynamics of society's growing obsession with plastic surgery and the accompanying role that mass marketing plays, she has created her own product line of surgical implants complete with sales brochures and a website.

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"Scenario"

Through Feb. 5 | Installations by Mia Fetterman-Mulvey, Carrie Olson and Julie Poitras Santos | Phillip J. Steele Gallery, Rocky Mountain College of Art + Design, 1600 Pierce St. | Free | Noon to 5 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays (303-753-6046 or www.rmcad.edu)