

'Plant' images, sprouting with life

By Christine Temin
GLOBE STAFF

The figure is unmistakably that of the Venus of Willendorf, the prehistoric, pre-Weight Watchers fertility goddess. This particular replica of the icon is made of a gourd, grown in a Venus of Willendorf mold.

Art Review

A nearby "pipe fitting" turns out to be made of a gourd that grew inside it. The Venus gourd makes you think of woman's age-old role as a vessel, the plumbing gourd of the uneasy coexistence of nature and modern civilization, with a hint of the havoc a gourd would cause with *real* plumbing.

The gourds, by Daniel Ladd, are part of "Plant Matter," an exhibition at the New Art Center with great eye appeal and plenty to chew on, figuratively speaking. The curators — Abbie Read, Jessica Straus, and Antoinette Winters — have included themselves in this show of 17 New England artists who work with botanical imagery "outside the context of traditional still life or landscape," the wall text says. This is truer of the three-dimensional work than the work in 2-D, which occasionally hovers on the edge of the coy

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Amy Cain's mixed-media work "As If Touched by the Dust of Memories II" is part of the show "Plant Matter."



Linda Huey's large ceramic pieces, which evoke fleeting life, are the highlight of the show. "Seed Pod With Green Ribs" shows a plant's advanced state of decay.

Decorative art that's rooted in nature

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sentimentality that inspires people to press flowers into a book or hang them from the attic rafters to dry. On the other hand, there is such emphatic, attention-grabbing work here that the subtler pieces tend to get lost, like fragile flowers trying to exist in the shadow of a mighty tree.

There's a lot of art made of soil, stone, and plants around now, both inside galleries and outdoors. The trend reflects contemporary artists' desire to reengage a public alienated from an art world they don't understand, a world that can make them squirm with discomfort. There is an urge among artists who are considered cutting edge to make their work less off-putting, to be useful, to have their materials be recognizable — and themselves be recognized.

At the same time, artists seem to care less and less about the permanence of their work, an attitude that allows them to use ephemeral materials — including plants. The great German artist Anselm Kiefer has often incorporated straw in his magisterial paintings. In the west wing lobby of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, the young artist Sarah Sze has created an airy, complex installation, incorporating petals that inevitably rot, only to be swept up and replaced by others. On the more "practical" side, at least in theory, were John Cage's "Edible Placemats," hand-

Plant Matter

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made paper made of herbs, grasses, and wildflowers.

The NAC show doesn't go quite that far. Most of the work is *about* plants rather than made of them. The most impressive exception is Beth Galston's flowers, leaves, and twigs trapped in an ice-like resin. She does them in large, stand-alone sizes, but also in endearing little ice cube-size groups.

A wall's worth of Straus's painted wooden reliefs open the show. This is her "Display Garden" of fairy-tale veggies. Most are not-quite-identifiable squashes or gourds, sprouting nasty-looking spikes or tickle-ready tails. Some look like weapons; others, like sperm. There's a clearly recognizable radish, oversized, as if it had taken steroids, and something that resembles an ear of corn with aggressive kernels, all in black. A shower of golden needles falls from it, recalling the sacred role of corn in pre-Columbian Mesoamerican cultures — and the European legend of Danae, impregnated by Jupiter in the form of a shower of gold.

Most dramatic among the painters in the show is Margery Hamlen, whose voluptuous oil on panel pieces depict broken cornstalks, defeated by their environ-

ment but noble nonetheless. The backgrounds of Hamlen's works are blackish and brooding, setting off the brittle stems no longer able to support their heavy ears of corn. Here, unfettered nature battles nature cultivated by humans.

Much of the work in the exhibition is decorative, but not in any derogatory sense. For instance, Jan Arabas's trio of monotypes, long vertical scrolls of paper hung from pale ribbons that slide down their sides, are exquisitely soothing. The handmade papers have a life of their own, curling and wrinkling slightly, not content to be mere passive recipients of the imagery, which is in the tradition of Asian paintings of plants, economically and swiftly brushed.

The showstoppers are Linda Huey's ceramic pieces, so large they have to be reinforced by unseen metal scaffolding. Scaled down to life-size, they'd risk being kitsch. But Huey makes them gigantic, which gives them an insistent presence. "Line Bend Flower," nearly 5 feet long, is a horizontal prima donna swooning over two pedestals. Best of all is "Upside Down Flower." Slightly over 7 feet tall, it lists sideways. Its blackened roots reach to the sky, while its long, curved stem ends in a bud that seems to smash into the floor. The uprooted blossom will never fully open, never fulfill its destiny. Huey's clay plants are about nothing short of thwarted life and inevitable death.