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ARTS & CULTURE » VISUAL ART

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Here and Now and Then

Art for vanquishing the end-of-summertime blues at Vessel and Mercury 20.

By DeWitt Cheng



Emergent Behaviors comprises figurative wall-mounted wire sculptures by Pamela MeroryDernham and paintings by Walter James Mansfield that they influenced; it is thus a cohesive and complementary show. MeroryDernham bends powder-coated steel wire into lively figures that emerge from the wall or from their rectangular canvas backgrounds, suggesting pen drawings sprung from their paper supports. There are no explicit narratives here, but viewers will surely create their own, aided by titles invoking ancient Greece, classical Graces, and mythic Valkyries, or playfully alluding to their own ambiguity ("More To It Than Meets the Eye," "Fascinating Rhythms," "Closely Guarded Secrets"); the gesticulating, dancing figures -- executed in thick and thin wire, creating an illusion of depth -- paired with their diffuse shadows seem both modern (Picasso and Calder) and ancient with Greco-Roman art clearly inspiring the "Vessel Frieze" series, wine-jar ornamentation unrolled from its clay cylinders. Mansfield's paintings in oil and enamel on canvas also flirt with archaism, but here cave art, with its prey animals and hunters strewn across earth-toned fields. Mansfield magically pursues his prey, attuned to how material and process affect and create imagery and meaning ("Emergent Behavior," "Temporal Mentality"). His stylized, semi-abstract figures suggest botany ("Papillaria") and geography ("Confluence") as well as hunters and shaman-artists. *Emergent Behaviors* runs through September 24 at Vessel Gallery (471 25th St., Oakland). 510-893-8800 or Vessel-Gallery.com.

City (or at least suburb or village) and country are the subjects of Jill McLennan's *City Strokes* painting show and Julie Alvarado's mixed-media *Camp* show. McLennan considers construction and graffiti as

equal and opposite means by which people affect their environment -- good or bad, depending on the merits of each case (with nature seemingly weighing in on the graffitists' side). Her cheerfully expressionist paintings of Oakland and other locales are thus slow snapshots of civilization and the natural world in colorful continual imbalance. Alvarado sees our attempts to live with nature with similar good (and even goofy) humor. In her paintings, sculptures and installation on the theme of learning woodcraft amid "thorns, stingers, horns, and some very sharp teeth," unwary ramblers fall prey to gigantic owlets, a mammoth bass capsizes a canoe, a chorus line of swimmers portages a smoldering S'more the size of a dragon boat, and so on. Why not go inside the centipede-adorned "Decorative Camping Phobia Tent"? Work on your Urban Merit Badges, but remember: Only you can prevent the electric fire from scorching your marshmallows. *City Strokes* and *Camp* run through October 1 at Mercury 20 (475 25th St., Oakland). 510-701-4620 or MercuryTwenty.com

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