

ARTFORUM



Rosha Yaghmai, *Hair* (detail), 2019, pipe, Hydrocal, epoxy resin, limestone, Miracle-Gro, mud mask, graphite, rust, glass, earth pigments, found materials, 2' 10" × 17' × 3' 9". Photo: Johanna Arnold.

Rosha Yaghmai

THE WATTIS INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS

A bathroom scene enlarged: floor, a few inches of wall, a lone strand of hair. The slightly raised ground is covered with what appear to be oversize ceramic tiles of a pastel-green hue but are in fact painted MDF. The trompe l'oeil binding "grout" is made of paint and sand. Along the walls, black "tiles," roughly four feet tall, are also made of wood panels and coated with piano lacquer. Their edges hug the floor in decorative curves. The whole space is an amplified, supersize reality. "It is the unfamiliar familiar, the conventional made suspect," Mike Kelley might say, and, indeed, this installation's scale shift is an uncanny bending of household material.

This simulation is "Miraclegrow," an exhibition by Rosha Yaghmai at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts whose title is a misspelling of a brand-name product attributed to the infamous pesticide company (which was handed significant fines in civil settlements for mislabeling potentially carcinogenic products, among other crimes). The promise of synthetic fertilizers such as Miracle-Gro, which endures relatively unscathed

post-lawsuit, is that plants fed with the product will grow faster at the cell-structure level, cheating time. This vector—the relationship of scale to time—imbues Yaghamai’s magnification with new meaning: The scene is fictional but plausibly backed by contemporary science. It is a rendering of America in all its inorganic vastness.

Spatially speaking, the centerpiece of the show is that oversize strand of hair (*Hair*, 2019), shaped from rusty pipes bent and welded together. Recalling decaying coral that has absorbed the toxins of its ecosystem (or bodies exposed to various pesticides and hormones), the hair’s surface is an amalgam of substances: household plastics, limestone, rust oxide, graphite, Miracle-Gro, mud masks, and plaster, all intermingled, eroded, and melded together. To make this conglomerate, the artist initially cast parts of her body (in what she tells me was a “very liquid” process) using these materials and then applied the resulting synthetic skins to the metal structure, wrapping its form with melted legs, elbows, and hands. The hands remain the most recognizable as they visibly grip the shape; the other body parts undulate, ripple, and fold unnaturally around the wiry sculpture. The work is visceral. It is abject. It is a body, blended into a messy puddle of nothing but information. DNA, like memory, is a chemical log of organic and inorganic inheritances. There is a cinematic horror to the thought of all the things passed down to you that you cannot control: the unnerving mystery of genetics and ingrained experiences.

The question of inheritance unfurls further in a more subtle work on view: A metal pipe protrudes from the far wall, prompting one to look in (or out). Up close, one begins to hear sounds and see light flickering from around a bend in the portal at the recognizable pace of a television set. The pipe must lead to a space out of reach, another room. The sound is a work: Commissioned by the artist from her brother, it is a nearly indecipherable fusion of the *Three’s Company* theme song with another by the Persian singer Ramesh. Foreign and local, nostalgic and haunting, the music establishes a certain distance. The artist connects this feeling to her experience as a Persian American woman raised with only an unspoken understanding of her culture and heritage, whose influence on her reasoning, behavior, and taste is like a sound heard from a deep recess. (Memory is still conceived of as a mysterious molecular technology for identity and sensory retrieval.)

Feebly casting a black-light glow on its immediate surroundings, a bug zapper (the only other object to scale in the room, tethering us to reality) is stationed near the pipe. The installation is too bright and forensic for its effect to be immersive. The artist is a cool customer in the face of perceptually altered realities. Her investigations evoke the query of every psychedelic experience, every “miracle”: Which real is real? Akin to this spiritual understanding is the conceptual but viscerally felt weight of Yaghmai’s works; they operate beyond language. This show is simple and yet profoundly experiential; in it, discomfort emanates from something fantastically familiar.

— Lauren Mackler