

MODERN PAINTERS

REVIEWS



MIAMI

Bhakti Baxter

Gallery Diet //

October 7–November 12

IN HIS LATE COLLAGES, Henri Matisse reached a state of synthesis by, in the artist's own words, "drawing directly in color." A similar ambition marks the opening work in the Miami native Bhakti Baxter's first hometown show in four years, entitled "Rompelotas."

A small collage, reminiscent of Matisse's autumnal style, hangs in the gallery's office; in the front room, a re-created version of it using expanded polystyrene foam and plaster, *Root Beer*, 2011, stretches the collage's feminine arabesques to an impressive eight feet tall. The gallery walls are painted the same shade of green as the collage's ground, which effectively turns the entire space into an installation on a grand scale.

Untitled (Swimmer), 2004, is a simple piece composed of a series of fluid ink strokes that represent a body of water and a man paddling through it. We imagine this figure, pushing against the current, to be drawing himself. This theme continues throughout the exhibition, including a series of photo-collages that pairs rivers and canyons—the cause of erosion and its index, respectively—with images of Henry Moore sculptures. The smooth contours and the stark opposition between positive and negative space in the Moore works connect to both Matisse's cropped edges and the crevasses of the riverbeds in Baxter's photographs.

Next to these are a series of prints inspired by Darcy's law, a mathematical relationship governing the flow of groundwater and other liquids through granular media, discovered in 1856 by the French engineer Henri Darcy. In Baxter's prints, a uniform pattern of lichenlike negative space set against a dark ground represents the natural process of liquid passing through a viscous medium. The swimmer, the collages, and these monoprints act as divining rods, fixating the viewer's attention on both water and its symbolic flow across various cultural periods.

In the back room, there is a postscript: a series of found plastic balls, flipped inside out to resemble Neolithic swim bladders, spewing forth a mixture of cement, resin, and paint. These balls perched atop pedestals—found objects such as file cabinets and shelving units—suggest lost monuments waiting for someone to push aside the undergrowth in an overgrown suburban future and discover them.

That final room raises larger questions about the retrospective mode, in that it somehow exists both in the past and the present. In her book, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, the critic Rosalind Krauss points out that as various media become indistinct, creative work must get at the essential in art. By doing exactly this, Baxter sets himself apart from the legions of small-town biennial artists—those who create a hit-or-miss practice out of varying media. While the pieces here are all more than capable of standing on their own, the fun lies in their unexpected yet easy union. In "Rompelotas," as in Matisse's late collages, the medium becomes something that just gets in the way.

—Hunter Braithwaite