

The Geography of Desire and Loss in Every Shiny Thing

Monaco Gallery, Exhibition Essay
2701 Cherokee St, St. Louis, MO 63118
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Sarah Knight, *Transient*, 2024. 23 x 19 x 11 inches. Huzzah river rocks, ceramic, Houston foraged clay and gravel, crushed steel, glazes, underglazes, melted stone chunks.

Aqueous, occult, and cosmological are three words that describe *Every Shiny Thing*, a group exhibition curated by Emily Mueller at Monaco Gallery in St. Louis. The exhibition features work by Molly Berlin, Morgan Rose Free, Sarah Knight (they/them), and Samantha Sanders, who navigate the geographies of loss and desire through affective objects. Named after the Joni Mitchell song, *Black Crow* (1976), in this exhibition, the viewer becomes the crow, “diving down to pick up on every shining thing.” Twisted, cavernous forms emerge from piles of black sand while an oversized centipede that functions as a candleholder seemingly crawls across the floor. Intimate graphite drawings that depict moments of transformation in nature sparingly adorn the walls and lead to a storefront window where a suncatcher made from ceramics, yarn, and found objects cascades down to meet a large, sand-washed vessel. Like fractal entities that glisten just beneath the water’s surface, the disparate space between each work quietly beckons the viewer in toward the autonomous parts of an essentialized whole.

Upon entering, one is confronted with three of Sarah Knight’s ceramic sculptures, set slightly off-center on the gallery’s floor. The focal point is a work titled *Transient*, made with Ozark drusy quartz, melted stone powder, and crushed gravel. Its amorphous curvature, reminiscent of sea coral, is crackled and crusted, porous yet hardened as it grows from the depths of the black sand. Warm reds and dusty pinks coincide with mossy green drips, yellow specks, and shiny steel metallics. To its left are two smaller *Lantern* pieces, their rounded forms in dialogue with one another in shades of lilac and moss.

Knight’s works are intentionally ambiguous, seeking to queer material forms through creation, destruction, and re-use. They draw from naturalistic processes and materials to navigate through malleable states of transformation. Here, their works triangulate across the gallery. *Lichen Jar*, an organic vessel made from reclaimed ceramic with slips and glazes in warm greens and greys, sits on a pedestal to the left alongside another *Lantern*. Slinking along the back wall, a final *Lantern* in muted pink with a sponge-like texture

grows from a tapered trail of black sand upon the floor. Its presence is familiar and unknown: as if it could exist as a fading piece of coral whose death is imminent, as a biological specimen in the ocean's darkest depths, or as a fragmented meteor of unknown origin from beyond Earth's atmosphere.

Directly above the otherworldly *Lantern* hangs a drawing by Samantha Sanders titled *July*. Made from graphite on paper mounted on panel, Sanders depicts a caterpillar inching along the underside of a leaf against a stippled background, ensconced within an organic frame of drawn flowers. Sanders' works are small in scale yet intimate, drawing the viewer in through rhythmic mark-making informed by line and repetition. The symbolic interplay of light and shadow recalls that of William Blake. She uses framing devices within the drawn picture plane to freeze time and highlight moments of metamorphosis in nature: a caterpillar turning into a butterfly, insects caught within the sinewy silk threads of a spider's web, and larvae basking in the moonlight. Sanders reminds us that within darkness, there is abundant life.



Morgan Rose Free, *Centipede*, 2023, ceramic, wax, sand, appr. 22 x 5 x 15 inches.

Morgan Rose Free further activates spatial-temporal dimensions in the gallery space, bringing a bodily awareness to what is often overlooked or out of sight. At the intersection of sculpture and assemblage, Free navigates through desire and loss within the ongoing climate crisis. Her anthropomorphic clay sculptures distort the scale of the insect kingdom to confront that which is creepy and crawling. Although static, the centipede in the front of the gallery seemingly wriggles across the floor; its multitudinous and undulating legs imply movement. Wax drips down from elongated floral candles onto its form, leaving remnants on the black sand. *Slug #2* sits directly across from it, on a pedestal on the other side of the gallery. Soft-bodied and slimy, slugs are a type of mollusk that exist in the gap between land and sea. Lines are horizontally hatched along the sides of its body, echoing the gestures in Sanders's drawings. As a reminder of death's inevitability, what was once a flickering candle flame is now a stream of melted wax dribbling down its brick clay membrane.

In the front window that opens to the street is a suspended mobile, along with a vast, sun-washed vessel that sits below it. *The Little Things that Run the World #3*, also by Free, is a vertical assemblage of objects that could be found on the beach: Matisse-like cutouts of critters and foliage with brightly colored weavings overtop sway downward to meet a thin metal chain embellished with bottle caps and ceramic charms. At the bottom hangs a purple back massager, juxtaposed against the other items.

Molly Berlin's ceramic vessel, *Earth Pourer*, is the color of fine beach sand with gestural mark-making like the tide. The exterior is smooth with sweeping washes. In contrast, the interior contains an organic

pattern of finger indentations that create an index of the artist's handwork within the clay's pliable surface. Influenced by the "patterns and colors growing up in her parent's kite shop at the beach in New Jersey," Berlin's vessel captures a sense of inner and exteriority as a place to store material traces and memories.

Mueller's curation is painstakingly deliberate, where the negative space between each work is palpable. The intentional gaps and silences between the artworks invite introspection, urging the viewer to contemplate their own desires and the societal structures that perpetuate them. As Lauren Berlant contends in her book *Cruel Optimism* (2011), overconsumption is an attempt to overcome feelings of powerlessness. Like the crow drawn to shining things, cruel optimism occurs when the things we desire are often the very things that hold us back.ⁱ The inherent violence of primitive accumulation is exemplified through feelings of powerlessness due to alienation, climate change, the negation of bodily autonomies, and the erasure of cultural histories. In this exhibition, each artist harnesses chance, discomfort, and uncertainty to make space for personal growth and metamorphosis to occur. Every Shiny Thing ultimately serves as a reminder that despite the systems we build to exert control, we are ultimately subject to the uncontrollable forces of nature.



Left: Samantha Sanders, *July*, 2024, graphite on paper, 12 x 9 inches.
Right: Morgan Rose Free, *Slug #2*, 2023, ceramic and wax, appr. 12 x 2.5 x 15 inches.

ⁱ Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press, 2011. Berlant's notion of cruel optimism examines societal attachment to the promise of "the good life" in terms of socio-economic mobility, equality, job security, and progressive politics in relation to the increased presence of postwar neo-liberal capitalism, where there is no such guarantee. She states these desires are not intrinsically cruel, but chasing after a moving goalpost ultimately causes suffering and disillusionment. Affect, or the attention to feeling, mood, and emotion, can disrupt the banality of the everyday, where reciprocity and a sense of shared communion help to recalibrate our collective well-being.