

KQED

At Royal NoneSuch, Emily Mast and Henna Vainio Make Life Strange

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Emily Mast, Still from 'ENDE (Like a New Beginning),' 2014. (Photo by Martin Diccico)

Since seeing Emily Mast and Henna Vainio: Step of Two at Oakland's Royal NoneSuch Gallery (on view through June 4), I can't get T. Rex's 1973 song, "Life is Strange," out of my head. With its overly simplistic and repetitive lyrics on life's impermanence, human behavior and (if I stretch) diversity of experiences, the classic-rock earworm — which Mast uses in her two videos — is a fitting framework for two artists who use absurdist tactics to estrange viewers from common objects and experiences.

Both Mast and Vainio amplify and defamiliarize very mundane objects, like cardboard, fruit, bread and pencils, but with extremely different approaches. Mast draws upon conceptual choreography to create collaborative performances she documents with video, while Vainio makes meticulous plaster sculptures and wall-hangings, using casting techniques to imprint textures from found objects. Mast's video pieces focus on people and emotions, and Vainio's abstracted, sparsely decorated works only hint at bodily presences.

Aesthetically, both artists' works skew towards warm, earthy tones — especially soft browns and golden yellows — and the curation embraces these peppy hues with two painted gallery walls. Vainio's two Legs sculptures, one yellow and the other orange, demand attention with their bold color and height. At over six feet tall, these sculptures appear upon first pass to be carefully posed, painted cardboard with the corrugated side out.

However, the surfaces' seamlessness, and the unnatural soft folds at the bends, tell another story. They're cast plaster, molds of which Vainio allows to slouch while setting. The textural disconnect between the supple, paper-based original and the hardened, though still fragile, plaster replica is alluring. (Vainio's wall hangings, comparatively restrained in color and size, repeat the technique of casting found objects in plaster; however, the original objects for these imprints are less recognizable, which increases the abstraction.) Each "leg" sags and folds with character, lending a surprisingly human personality to the objects.

Vainio's gentle method of turning familiar objects towards the uncanny segues nicely into Mast's work. Her two media pieces are in conversation with each other, one as a "footnote" to the other, and were commissioned by the Hammer Museum for its 2014 Made in L.A. exhibition. ENDE (Like a New Beginning) shows a fast-paced montage of actors moving through the museum as they perform bizarre poses and dance with seemingly random props: lemons, baguettes, soccer balls, pencils and cardboard boxes. The resulting movements range from humorous tableaux vivants to excruciating balancing acts, evoking emotions of delight, precarity, frustration and fear.

In the background of ENDE, the acoustic guitar chords of "Life is Strange" at times sync up with the audio of the second video, located in a different part of the gallery. ENDE (Like a New Beginning) Footnote loops two scenes of individuals — one child, one adult — singing acoustic versions of "Life is Strange" in an empty, tiled room (a restroom at the Hammer). Mast's choice of a catchy tune stems from her continued interest in musical "contagion," but her video does much more than lodge the song in the viewer's head.

The child's expressive face looks around as the camera stays still, and she draws out nuance from the basic lyrics, presenting youth's fresh curiosity, if not innocence. When she croons the line "some don't even ask ya how you've been," her eyes seem bewildered at how uncaring people might be. In contrast, the older woman's attitude is internal and contemplative, a more solemn reflection on life's tragicomedy as someone wizened and hardened — her face shifts when she sings "people come, people go." At the end of her song, she holds a thoughtful expression, perhaps feeling the weight of the simple statement: Life is strange.

The exhibition concludes on June 4 with a special event of Mast's latest project, "Animal Empathy Exercises," in collaboration with Southern Exposure (whose upcoming group exhibition, Curious Poses, also includes Mast's work). The workshop explores animality and interspecies connections through somatic exercises — and promises to further embrace the process of learning from the strange.