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SPIDER WOMEN, CARGO SHIPS, CHIA GRASS, AND 'MOMMY': BEHIND THE SCENES OF 'MIRROR CELLS' AT THE WHITNEY MUSEUM

BY *John Chiaverina* POSTED 06/10/16 10:00 AM



Installation view of "Mirror Cells," 2016, showing Elizabeth Jaeger's "Vessels" series.
GENEVIEVE HANSON, N.Y.

The term “mirror neurons” refers to the brain cells that activate when observing other’s actions. It is also partly the inspiration behind the title of “Mirror Cells,” the much-talked-about five-artist sculpture exhibition on view through August 21 on the eighth floor of the Whitney Museum in New York.

“When we settled on ‘Mirror Cells’ there was definitely this scientific and biological connection to mirror neurons,” Whitney associate curator Christopher Y. Lew, who organized the exhibition alongside associate curator Jane Panetta, told me. “But I think we also liked the idea that a lot of these artists are creating these worlds, these almost cell-like environment spaces, and that they are reflective of the world or their own life, so in a way the title could have this kind of double entendre for us.”

The exhibition, in part, came about as a result of the curators taking in shows at smaller galleries and project spaces around the city. It was there that they observed certain threads that would end up connecting a lot of the work in “Mirror Cells,” namely a movement toward the use of humble materials, figurative elements, and also what Panetta called “this idea of people willingly engaged with narrative, but also narratives that have to do with political issues, or with personal issues.” The curator said that “a lot of the works have a certain vulnerability to them that feels manifested in how they were made in a funny way formally, but also in the content, the personal content that they were willing to share.”

A good amount of the work on display was created specifically for the show. Elizabeth Jaeger contributed nine new narrow “ceramic vessels” on steel saw horses. They look a bit like the AT-AT Walkers from *Star Wars* and take up the center of the space. “They’re vases, but I’m calling them vessels because they also kind of resemble a steam ship, like a cargo boat,” Jaeger told me over the phone. “If you look at the footprint of a cargo ship, it’s kind of in an elongated oval,” she explained. “They have a similar vibe.”

Although vessels weren’t on the forefront of her mind, Jaeger told me that she was having cruise ship-related nightmares while creating the work. “When I finished making them I stopped dreaming of cruise ships and boats,” she said. “When you’re making work, you don’t really sometimes know directly what it’s about,” she continued. “I never thought about them as boats, and I kept having these dreams, then I was looking at them, and I was like, ‘Oh, these are so obviously kind of a boat.’ ”

Each work in “Mirror Cells” can function as its own discrete narrative, but when spread out among the space and contextualized with other pieces, new conversations and stories begin to unfold. Another New Yorker, Maggie Lee, has installed four televisions playing different chapters from her movie *Mommy*—a documentary about her late mother in the aftermath of her passing. Each television is outfitted with shiny, hyperspecific decorations that represent a member of Lee’s family: her mother, her father, her sister, and herself. Some of the televisions have the sound on, so that they are literally in conversation with other pieces in the show.



Liz Craft, *Spider Woman Black Dress*, 2015, papier-mâché and mixed media.
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Maggie Lee, *Mommy* (still), 2015, digital video.
COURTESY THE ARTIST

“Everyone has these characters that they made, or the sculptures are kind of like weird people or weird figures, but they’re all existing in this weird landscape,” Lee said in a phone interview. “Liz Craft has these spider women sculptures and I feel like I can see them blinking at times, and you can hear the TV buzzing in the background, looping on speakers. So, it’s this weird echoing thing, but when you walk closer you can listen to a story if you pay attention.”

Indeed, the sculptures that Craft (the lone Los Angeles artist in a show of New Yorkers) has made depict disembodied spider women of sorts, with papier-mâché heads and cobwebs shooting out of wooden planks that form their arms and legs. “The work in the Whitney contains a lot of new work specific to the space as well as work developed in the last five years,” Craft said over email. “The works continue older ideas of form and collage, but I think I’m getting more clear about my interest in installation.” Both bodies of work, she explained, attempt to “engage the space and try to include the viewer.”

Other works approach the space in different ways. Rochelle Goldberg’s installation *No Where, Now Here* includes live chia grass growing out of the carpet, creating an actual ecosystem within a sculptural one, and Win McCarthy’s sculptures take on a decidedly raw feel, collaging newspaper clippings and self-portraits with rough-and-ready materials, including metal and rocks. Some are diorama-like pieces that synthesize personal and political concerns, and take a look at city living through an internal lens.

In our interview, Lew said that “Mirror Cells” is similar to the Whitney’s recent contemporary painting exhibition, “Flatlands,” in that it attempts to locate “certain tendencies that are actually happening right now.” To capture the present moment, the curators acted quickly, spending less than a year organizing the show, working at a pace more common for a small commercial gallery than a major institution. The goal, Panetta said, was to create an exhibition that is “reflective of what’s happening in real time.”

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