

DAILYSERVING

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Heidi Schwegler: Botched Execution at the Art Gym

While walking through her retrospective *Botched Execution*, Portland-based artist [Heidi Schwegler](#) recounted a story about a lost baby boy. He disappeared during the night—last seen falling asleep in bed between his grandparents. In the morning, he was gone. The police arrived to search the home and surrounding area, and they turned up no trace. Hours later, in the bedroom, an officer heard a small cough—a distinctly babyish burble. He took up a crowbar and began pulling up the floorboards, one after another, until the baby was found nestled securely between two joists, patiently waiting to be freed.



Heidi Schwegler. *Separation Anxiety_04*, 2014; concrete; 16 x 16 x 6 in.
Courtesy of the Artist and the Art Gym at Marylhurst University. Photo: Stephen Funk

In this exhibition, the anecdote is represented by the piece *Woodburn* (2012), a sickly white, cast-rubber crowbar that hangs flaccidly from a nail in the gallery

wall. Like many of Schwegler's artworks, it suggests deliberate confusion between body and material object. The crowbar is a metonym for the officer who wielded it, depleted and collapsed after the stress of a frantic search. Schwegler is known for creating images and objects that are at once familiar and strange. Much of her inspiration comes from the detritus of everyday life—material that has been discarded and left to decompose in a backyard or ditch. Perpetually overlooked within the material landscape, she refers to these items as "peripheral ruin." They can be surprisingly intimate, like an orthopedic cane or a child's plushy plaything, or they can be piteously mundane, like a cardboard box or severed length of metal chain. Either way, these things are part of an obsolescent flow—material untethered from any sense of functionality, devoid of value, and capable of withering away invisibly in plain sight.



Heidi Schwegler. *Botched Execution*, 2015; installation view. Courtesy of the Art Gym at Marylhurst University. Photo: Worksighted.

A perceptual shift is required to see this visual noise anew. Schwegler's found, modified, and crafted sculptures transform routine sights into discoveries that perplex and delight. Visitors will encounter *Manders* (2014), a silver jerrycan

perforated with a spray of bullet holes; *Transient Dimming* (2013), a plastic kiddie pool flocked with grey fleece; and *Separation Anxiety 04* and *05* (2014), a series of dented pillows cast in materials that include concrete and translucent glass. On the whole, these objects compose an otherworldly landscape that compels viewers to reconsider decaying material in an entirely new light. What do our possessions say about us, and how do they lend structure, substance, and meaning to our lives?



Heidi Schwegler. *Transient Dimming*, 2014; flocked kiddie pool; 39 x 36 x 10 in. Courtesy of the Artist and the Art Gym at Marylhurst University. Photo: Richard Gehrke.

Some of Schwegler's objects are transformed through the surface, others are common things rendered in unexpected materials. Then there is the occasional readymade. These found objects are crucial additions to the exhibition—they interrupt the seamlessness of Schwegler's masterfully handcrafted tableau. A cast-bronze jump rope displayed near a well-loved dog toy causes systems of value to conflate and collapse. Moreover, the found objects bring in traces of the real world. Mortality and decay become visceral and affective forces outside the realm of aesthetic contemplation. These objects call Schwegler's fiction into question and slowly break down the spell of the gallery.



Heidi Schwegler. *Manders*, 2014; gas can, paint; 8 x 14 x 6 in. Courtesy of the Artist and the Art Gym at Marylhurst University. Photo: Stephen Funk.

Just as real bleeds into fiction, Schwegler's objects merge with bodies. Most are strikingly humanized, made pathetic like any thing that has been used and then cast aside. *Transient Dimming* appears to deflate, as if exhaling with a sigh; and *Help Yourself* (2008), a cardboard box cast in aluminum, is splayed out on the gallery floor like a corpse. The artist cites these corporeal affectations as reminders of her own mortality, often speaking of the *living death*, a transitory state between being and nothingness in which a thing is left to molder and dissolve.

Schwegler has also experimented with representing her own body's decay. In 2011 she hired a makeup artist to transform her into an addict whose face progressively wastes away as a consequence of using meth. The result is *My Struggle*, a series of C-prints that document her dramatic transition. Also on view is a piece titled *Wrest 01* (2010), a video that portrays Schwegler wrestling with an omitted opponent, her small form tortured and twisting onscreen as she struggles against a nebulous field of white. The juxtaposition of time-based media with her sculptural works serves to enhance the temporal gravity expressed in both. Matter, whether fiber or flesh, is constantly in flux, and decay is an eventuality that we all will confront.



Heidi Schwegler. *Fade to Black*, 2010; installation view, *Botched Execution*, 2015. Courtesy of the Art Gym at Marylhurst University. Photo: Worksighted.

The artist does not let us forget that there is beauty to be found in decay.

Darkening the stately arced windows of the Art Gym is *Fade to Black* (2010), a venetian blind coated in black flocking that has been nearly destroyed by gunfire. Inspired by the blast curtains found in homes in the Middle East, the work's dark screen is punched through with light, illuminating the surfaces of the artworks beyond. *Fade to Black* is a reminder that dark fluctuates with light.

Decomposition is merely another part of alchemy, and even the most mundane objects have the capacity to transform our everyday perception of the world.

Heidi Schwegler: *Botched Execution is on view at the Art Gym at Marylhurst University through May 15, 2015.*