

Affecting, unsettling works from the Frist Center's Fairy Tales, Monsters and the Genetic Imagination

Five Uneasy Pieces

by LAURA HUTSON | April 12, 2012

1. "Rapture," 2001, Kiki Smith

There's an apse-like front gallery lined with cutout silhouettes of trees that's not connected to the rest of the exhibit. It is shallow and cavernous, and a bronze Kiki Smith sculpture greets you at the turn of a corner like a bear in a cave. In "Rapture," Smith confronts subject matter that is well-worn territory in the art she's been creating since the 1970s: the subversion of traditional representations of women. In Smith's hands, Red Riding Hood is now a full-grown woman, standing naked and triumphant with one foot still inside the corpse of the wolf she's just cut open.

2. "Forest," 2009, by Allison Schulnik

Sure, it has the benefit of a bench placed front and center and an excellent soundtrack by Grizzly Bear, but Allison Schulnik's Claymation video would captivate even without auditory or benchatory assistance. "Forest" shows a pitiful monster, eyes as big as one of the sad orphans in a Margaret Keane painting, as he tries to connect with other creatures through a psychedelic arrangement of color. Since Schulnik, who's in her early 30s, is one of the youngest artists in the exhibit, giving her piece this much prominence shows curator Mark Scala's confidence in her work. It's well-earned.

3. "Untitled," 1989, Cindy Sherman

Cindy Sherman is arguably the most recognizable name in Fairy Tales, and with the current retrospective of her work at MoMA she's gaining fame by the minute. In this untitled piece from 1989, Sherman depicts herself as either a witch or a corpse, depending on your perspective. She is a naked blue-eyed blonde, with long nails and thin Baby Jane eyebrows. But she is more threatening than seductive — her eyes are bloodshot, strands of her hair seem to be caked with blood, and her nipples look shiny and swollen with infection.

4. "Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (America)," 2008, Yinka Shonibare

Yinka Shonibare turns Goya's famous etching "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters" on its head with this enormous C-print. The British-Nigerian artist collapses Goya's musing on Enlightenment ideals into a criticism of colonialism, and while it's not exactly subtle — the wide-eyed stuffed-and-mounted owls and costumes made from African cloth are pretty loud, so to speak — it's a layered statement that borrows from art history to comment on regular history. That African fabric is actually Dutch wax-printed cotton, after all, itself a product of colonialism.

5. "Cocktail Party," 2001, Charlie White

Part of Charlie White's Understanding Joshua series, "Cocktail Party" shows Joshua, a pot-bellied creature, trying to fit in at a party full of tanned J. Crew-ad types holding wine glasses on golden cocktail napkins. He is sweetly inhuman, like a teenage E.T., and White presents him without clothes, just a mound of bright red pubic hair to cover his nakedness. The artist calls him "complete fragility manifest in a body," and after you've acclimated yourself to the creepiness of the figure, try not to relate to Joshua next time you feel awkward in a crowd. Klee. I actually wanted to get to know who this man was and why he was doing what he was doing more or less so I could figure out how I could respond to this work in some kind of a legitimate way."