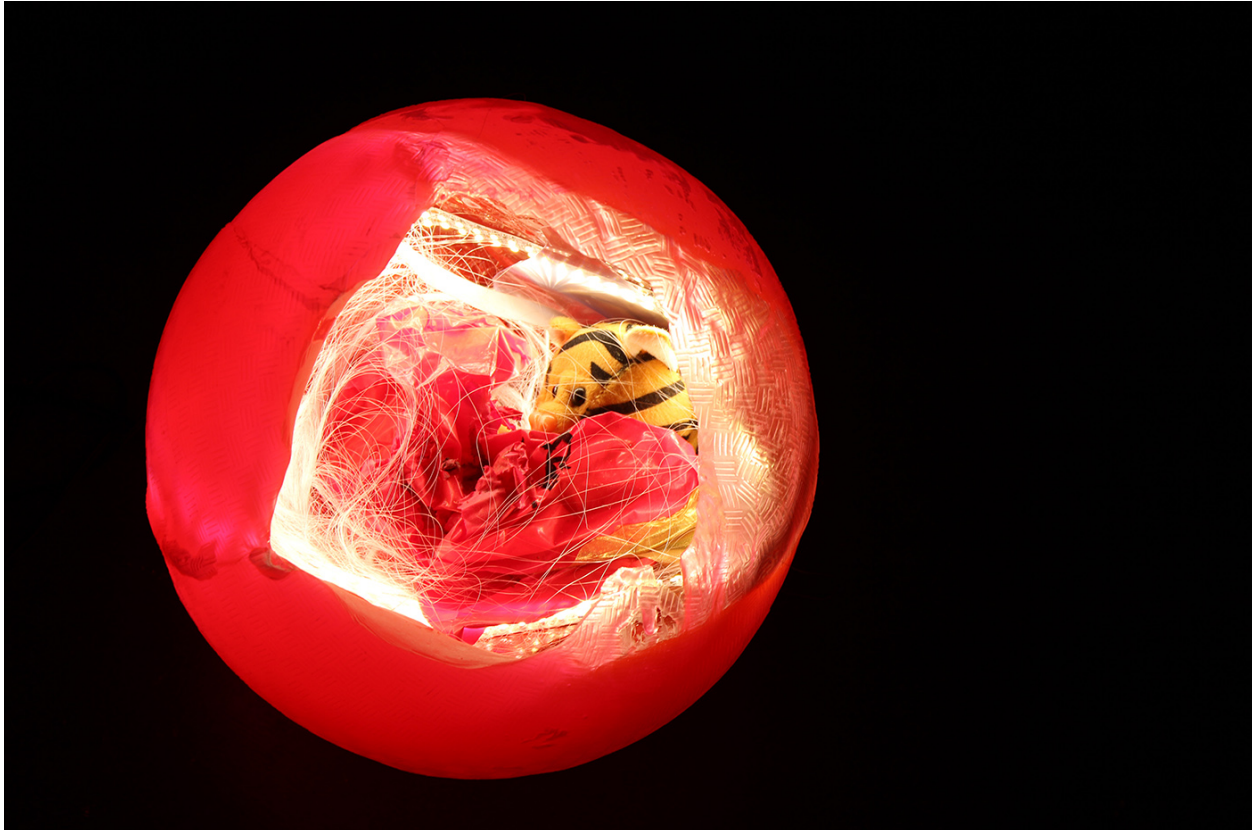


# HYPERALLERGIC

## How Art Making Is Like World Building

This group show acknowledges the art-making process as one of world building, in the sense that artists are continuously generating sets of rules to govern their work.

Sarah Rose Sharp – January 30, 2017



Ajay Kurian, "Liebig Ball 3" (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

KALAMAZOO, Mich. — “How might our understanding of art shift if we consider artworks not strictly as objects but individual, constructed worlds?” This is the question posed by *Worlding*, a five-person show envisioned and executed by the New York Professional Outreach Program’s curator Mia Curran at the Richmond Center for Visual Arts at Western Michigan University. The question acknowledges the art-making process as one of world building, in the sense that artists are continuously generating sets of rules to govern their work.

What worlds exist within the sprawling Albertine Monroe-Brown Gallery? There are little worlds, like the intimate, playful terrariums of Ajay Kurian, which host childish ephemera — plastic toys, sparkly pipe cleaners, and LED lights — inside cast-resin balls or a fish tank-like enclosure. There are also symbolic worlds, like the intermedia works of Hayal Pozanti, which parlay data points and statistics into an alphabet of the artist’s own invention, dubbed “Instant Paradise.” The results come in the form of digital animations, paintings, and sculptures — some display individual “letters” (resembling a kind of modern art kanji, or other Eastern language characters)

on stretched, round canvases, called “sun shades,” sculpted out of roughly textured polystyrene foam, calcium carbonate, acrylic polymer, and acrylic paint — all of which evoke a sense of alien artifact.



Ajay Kurian, “Comfort Zone #5 (Mind the Gap, Praise the Curve)” (detail view)

Inverted worlds, like Ben Hagari’s 11-minute 35mm film (transferred to HD video), display the artist’s surroundings in negative colors. An inkjet print captures one of the film’s subjects, a caged parrot — both the subject and spectrum of the image lend a feeling of being trapped. He has also “inverted” a light bulb by spray painting it black, casting a blotch of black light onto the white surface of the gallery wall.

Marsha Cottrell is interested in how we observe our environments through screens and lenses. She creates telescoping worlds in repetitive monochrome works on paper where she has printed and reprinted layers upon layers of geometric shapes, creating a buildup of ink into fuzzy paper substrates.

This pairs with another body of highly mediated worlds, as conveyed in Lucas Blalock’s photographs, which show visible Photoshop interventions into staged tableaux of domestic objects. According to the artist’s statement, the work is intended as a critique of the “widespread use of digital tools to retouch photographs for commercial and corporate purposes.”

In the end, the exhibition works to create a little world of its own, with many points of resonance between the pieces — some of Blalock’s domestic objects crop up in Hagari’s film or mimic Kurian’s terrarium-like sculptures. The fight between analogue and digital technologies is regulated by a harmonious palette, which features austere and monochrome works punctuated by bright and welcome flashes of color. The pastel colors of Pozanti’s rough sculptures mirror

the negative colors of Hagari's film. One gets the feeling that, if the artworks are indeed of separate worlds, they at least belong to the same solar system.

Curran has also done extremely well with a challenging exhibition space, which features ceilings so high as to dwarf almost any subjects, and the team at the university rose to meet her specifications, creating a freestanding black box for Hagari's film and an inset panel to hold Kurian's large diorama, to lovely effect.

Some of these worlds are charming, some poignant, some deeply alienating, but underlying all of these is a collision between two other worlds: the New York-based art one and that of a university in Western Michigan.

The exhibition represents the fifth collaboration between Western Michigan University (WMU) and the New York Professional Outreach Program (NYPOP). NYPOP was developed 25 years ago at UMass Amherst, as a program that sought to address the burning question facing most who pursue higher art education: What do artists do once they leave school? This program features short intensive visits that bring students from host institutions (originally only UMass, but now expanded to include others, such as WMU) to New York City, taking them into working artist's studios during curator visits, and exposing them to the systems upon which the wider art world is built. At the same time, the program dispatches emerging New York-based curators to the exchange cities, with the aim of having them present work from the cutting-edge of the New York art scene.

The partners program is founded on the notion that few universities and colleges are able to sustain an ongoing relationship with the New York art scene, and seeks to provide opportunities for exposure and inclusion to students from regionally different backgrounds. The Richmond Center is truly one of the only institutions in Western Michigan that hosts a diverse and global contemporary art curriculum — so the value that it offers to students and visitors who may never travel to more cosmopolitan locations cannot be dismissed.

And yet, part of me wonders if what the world truly needs is more exposure to New York art. While much of the work in Worlding is quite interesting, the digital and highly mediated forms cut against the grain of a Midwestern maker-based process and practical skills culture. This is not a true exchange of values, so much as an indoctrination and demonstration of New York art as the successful model for art-making — despite the fact that New York is increasingly an unviable and unaffordable working environment for all but the most successful artists. NYPOP, in its very construction, centralizes New York as the alpha and omega of the United States art scene, and in so doing, reflects a common form of New York myopia that it is the only and best thing that exists — an attitude that is as classically New York and inherently suspect as street cart meat.

There is much to be said for the discovery of new worlds, but one hopes that somewhere — perhaps secreted in a little glowing ball, lined with reindeer moss and stuffed with mementos — these exchange students and steadfast Michiganders retain a confidence in the validity of their own worlds and visions. The world you create according to the expectations of others is never as beautiful as the one that already exists within you, waiting to manifest.

*Worlding continues at the Richmond Center for Visual Arts (College of Fine Arts, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Mich.) through February 3.*

*Western Michigan University's Richmond Center for Visual Arts reimbursed the author for her travel expenses from Detroit to Kalamazoo, Mich.*