



Artistic 'Break-Through' imagines Miami Beach after the storm

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At Locust Projects, Valerie Hegarty contentedly surveys her installation, which resembles the aftermath of a wrecking ball's crash through the wall of the nonprofit Design District gallery.

"This piece," she says, "is starting to have that fuzzy state you get between an hallucination and reality."

Hegarty's *Break-Through Miami*, which opened Sept. 11, continues the thematic conceits of the New York-based artist who has had solo shows at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and currently has an installation up at the Highline Public Art Project in New York -- a deconstruction of Jasper Cropsey's 1860 painting *Autumn on the Hudson River*. Hegarty often works as a reverse archaeologist, playing with art history and the process of transformation. She is also partial to the work of Gordon Matta-Clark, known for removing chunks of floors and walls in abandoned buildings, as well as the sheer lunatic scope of Urs Fischer, who upped the stakes by digging a \$250,000, 38-by-30-by-8-foot hole in the floor of the New York gallery Gavin Brown's Enterprise. Those pieces, Hegarty notes, are "heroic and yet simplistic."

For Locust Projects, Hegarty has created a head-on collision of nature and architecture. Visitors entering the gallery's front door are confronted by a massive piece painted on the opposite wall. It contains a photo-realist shot of the beach off Ocean Drive that's been set into a faux hole created through *trompe l'oeil*. Most of the walls in the gallery are lined in foam board that's been stapled onto the surface, covered in multiple layers of painted paper, then made to look as if it's been ripped apart.

Hegarty has rather expertly mirrored the effect of what would happen if a hurricane blew a hole through your house and, by some curious twist, the insurance check never arrived in time to fix the decay, mildew and rot entailed in water damage. She used watered-down house paint for this installation, and the splotches of faint black paint completely capture the look of mildew.

The inset photographic mural of the beach was taken by Norman Lenzion, a young artist who works at OHWOW, an alternative space just outside Wynwood, and the framing effect is intended to convey the idea of looking through a portal into another dimension: your house is shot, but the views of that postcard-perfect Florida scene are still killer.

The wall next to the faux hole is trashed to match how it would look after a hurricane. There's extreme destruction close to the hole, where the wind and rain would pour in the most, less destruction farther away. On the floor is a faux water-filled crater, its surface painted in varying colors intended to make the surface of water. The paint mirrors the face of a papier-mché bird, which has a few feathers and resembles a taxidermy specimen.

Six birds -- blue herons, sea gulls, pelicans and the odd pigeon for an urban touch -- are scattered around the floor of the gallery. This is another extension of the tropics, of vainglorious homes being taken back by the jungle of South Florida. Wildlife has colonized an interior landscape, though most self-respecting birds would probably opt for a better neighborhood than the Design District.

Part of the gallery's floor is covered in squares of painted construction paper in coral, beige and aqua, a collage taken from the Internet.

"I looked up Miami Beach hotel lobbies," Hegarty recalls, pointing to a printout of beautiful lobby terrazzo from a website, "and used this color palette. Then, I dumbed it all down, made it look more like linoleum that had been ripped up. It's layers of decay that are subtractive, not additive."

On another wall is a withered frond, surrounded by mounds of foam board and painted paper, as if a palm tree has begun to plunge through. This stretch of white wall is mostly untouched, flanked by a reception desk and a list of Locust Projects board members, from the artist Cooper, a gallery founder, to Sue Ervin of the Everglades Foundation. Leaving some walls blank and untouched is part of Hegarty's process.

"It's important," she says, "to have white space to emphasize the fantasy of the piece."

For Hegarty -- who often uses *trompe l'oeil* -- *Break-Through* meant working with the stylistic departure of photo-realist murals. In the past she's done deconstructed portraits of George Washington, but for this site-specific installation she didn't really bring in a lot of historical baggage. But there are some art jokes here, such as *Niagara Falls*, a torn-apart image of Niagara literally collapsed on the floor. *Break-Through* also continues her exploration of landscape painting, a process that "makes exotic places even more exotic and sublime, at the same time as it colonizes the landscape itself."

Before doing this Locust Projects piece, Hegarty had been to Miami only once, during Art Basel Miami Beach. For natives, the use of such obvious Miami imagery as palm fronds, sunny beaches and blue water triggers unfortunate feelings of being colonized by visiting New Yorkers who rave about the beach and refuse to dig deeper. But Miami doesn't have the useful historical baggage of the Hudson River School -- in fact, not that much past at all -- and Hegarty is so likable and unpretentious about her work that faulting her vision seems like nit picking.

"This isn't meant to be a social comment about the foreclosure crisis, or gentrification," she says, "and the black paint in the floor pond doesn't have anything to do with the oil crisis. It's just my picture of Miami, and to me, this place is a fantasy."