

HYPERALLERGIC

Judy Pfaff's Garden of Unearthly Delights

At Wave Hill, the artist presents a teeming world of natural and artificial abundance.

By Faye Hirsch | 12 November 2024

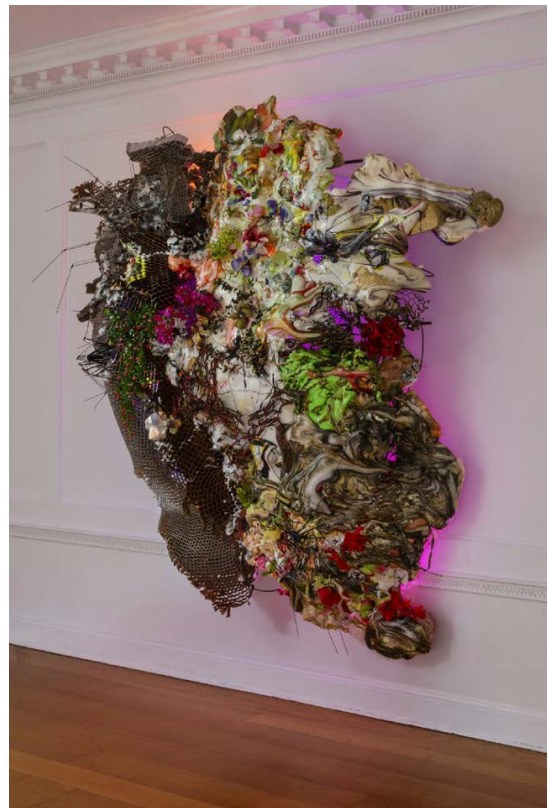


Detail of Judy Pfaff, "Glazed and Confused: Rockin' Lobster Majolica" (2024)
(all photos by Stefan Hagen, courtesy Wave Hill)

*Accuse not Nature; she hath done her part;
Do thou but thine. —John Milton*

Judy Pfaff's exhibition *Real and Imaginary*, presently installed in Wave Hill's Glyndor Gallery, will feel familiar to anyone who has visited the artist's Hudson Valley home, a remarkable sprawl of studio and living spaces where partially or wholly fabricated sculptures mix with gardens, meadows, and a veritable jungle of houseplants. Pfaff has always been a maximalist, and her installations have, since 1980 or so, combined vegetal materials (most notably trunks and branches, whose tangles seem to draw her in) and an array of human-made mediums, from painted steel and pigmented foam to cardboard, plastic, acrylics, and found objects, large and small. She has also made many prints, with several here on view; physically complex and layered in various mediums, they almost always make reference to nature through appropriated imagery from international and historical sources.

We find both natural and artificial abundance in the three rooms of *Real and Imaginary*, which include real hydroponically tended plants that resonate with views glimpsed through windows. Most of these living things are found in the second of three rooms, in which the sometimes topsy-turvy plants are arranged on shelves and behind transparent rectilinear plates. The installation is braced and structured with steel tubing, and illuminated throughout by LED lights that refract through the chromatic glazing to create a faux solarium bathed in warm colors. The whole looks like a thwarted Donald Judd installation, with sparseness and rigor overgrown but still present. Pfaff is never truly chaotic; only compare her work with that of post-Minimalist scatter artists such as Jason Rhoades, and her control is evident.



Judy Pfaff, "Glazed and Confused: Rockin' Lobster Majolica" (2024)

In the south gallery, a primarily white installation bathed in a cold, bluish light, presents a striking, somewhat melancholic, contrast. At its center is "Doctor Z," a work from 2020 in which a table and chairs draped with ragged white plastic sheets spill with overturned glasses, candelabra, and a tangle of white mesh. It has been repurposed within the room-sized installation "Fine Dining: Glyndor BWO Chapel Street" (2024), which adds, among other things, a small dead tree painted white, set in a chair like a diabolically transformed guest, and tall steel plants and metal vines, also painted white, which rise and snake across the ceiling. A drizzly plastic window shade adds a wintry cast. The catalog suggests as the work's narrative undercurrent an apocalyptic event from which revelers may have fled. To me, it also suggests a Victorian mystery sourced, perhaps, from Pfaff's English childhood.

Two of five wall-mounted sculptures in the final room include the word "Majolica" in their titles, and indeed, that ornate and florid ceramic style is conjured in a mashup of fascinating detail. In the multi-part "Hopper Dredge" (2024), hexacomb cardboard, extruded pigmented foam, fake flowers, wire, and string ooze extravagantly from three loosely gridded frames, the third winding up on the floor in a streaky toadstool-like form bearing real moss and plants. Throughout, a liquescent spill of foam, resin, and wonderfully malleable cardboard extrudes colorful fake flowers, plastic mesh, wires, and what looks like some kind of toxic goo promulgated by an unseen spider. The idea was that this work would feel in part like what you see teeming under an overturned log in the forest — but this is unquestionably the teeming of the Anthropocene. "How do we move forward from the melancholy of a poisoned planet?" asks philosopher Timothy Morton. Pfaff's answer lies in a flurry of the imagination.

Judy Pfaff: Real and Imaginary continues at Wave Hill (4900 Independence Avenue, Bronx, New York) through December 1. The exhibition was organized by Gabriel de Guzman, Rachel Raphaela Gugelberger, and Afriti Bankwalla.