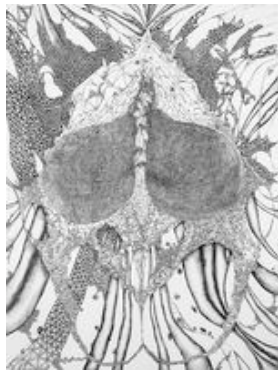


The Girls' Club Exhibition "Set to Manual" Celebrates the Human Touch

By Michael Mills

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Segre's Face Head: Painstaking effort.

Details:

"Set to Manual: An Exhibition of Works in Diverse Media Characterized by Intensive Hand Manufacture." through September 30, 2010, at Girls' Club, 117 NE Second St., Fort Lauderdale. Call 954-828-9151,

For one of the best group exhibitions of the year, look not to the area's museums and traditional galleries but to the alternative display space Girls' Club in downtown Fort Lauderdale. There you'll find "Set to Manual: An Exhibition of Works in Diverse Media Characterized by Intensive Hand Manufacture." Clunky title, cool show.

As that unwieldy subtitle makes clear, "Set to Manual" sets out to reassert the primacy of the handmade object. I kept thinking of a couple of lines from Adrienne Rich's 1971 poem "Waking in the Dark": "A man's world. But finished./They themselves have sold it to the machines." There is the implication, in those two stark lines, that a world in which the time and patience (among other things) necessary to create something lovingly handmade has traditionally been a woman's world. "Set to Manual" attempts to reclaim and redefine that territory.

Here is as good a place as any to point out that, despite its name, Girls' Club isn't some hotbed of radical feminism from which men are excluded. Although the majority of the 33 artists featured are female, male artists are generously represented as well. This is only the third exhibition for the 3-year-old gallery, which specializes in yearlong shows.

There's a credo of sorts for the exhibition, provided in an intro by Girls' Club creative director Michelle Weinberg: "The pace of contemporary life has eroded our collective attention spans, our ability to focus, and our enjoyment in investing sustained effort in a personal art project. Art's agenda is to slow us down, get us to pay attention. Now, more than ever,

many artists are adamantly rebelling against the generic, against slick product, against works that derive their meaning solely from art world insider contexts and theoretical supports."

Fair enough. Does the show deliver on that promise? Absolutely. I will start with Carol Prusa, an FAU instructor who has been one of my favorite South Florida artists for years and who is a perfect candidate for "Set to Manual." Prusa's instantly recognizable style relies on the use of silverpoint, a

medieval technique in which drawing is accomplished by dragging a silver wire or rod across a surface to create delicate marks. Prusa's *Anande* (2005) consists of a large wooden panel almost entirely blanketed with fleshy rosettes created thusly. Labor-intensive, indeed.

Then there's Tara Donovan, who gets a more contemporary feel with an untitled 2002 piece in which she uses a ballpoint pen to draw intricately swirling patterns that mimic such natural forms as crystals. For *Your rights are our responsibilities* (2009), Michael Genovese engraves impossibly tiny lines of text onto a sheet of highly polished aluminum. Both Amparo Sard and Rosemarie Chiaroni work in a sort of modified pointillism in which the tiny dots that make up the "image" consist of countless tiny pinpricks perforating the paper to which they are applied. There's similarly painstaking effort involved in IsrEaeli-born artist Michelle Segre's *Face Head* (2004), a work in gouache and pencil that looks like an amazingly detailed microscopic closeup of an insect's head.

There are abundant reminders that much artistic activity entails a degree of obsessiveness. That's certainly true of *I am afraid of everything* (2009), a site-specific mixed-media installation by Pepe Mar, one of the guys in the show. Described in the program notes as a "cramped closet of trinkets, dolls, fetishes, souvenirs and talismans," the work is breathtaking for the sheer volume of visual information it packs into a restricted space. Around the corner and under the stairs, a grouping of nearly a dozen jute and crochet *Vessels* — by the grande dame of Broward artists, Rosanna Saccoccio — evokes patience and persistence.

You get the idea. Although I'm not equally enthusiastic about every piece in the exhibition, there's no denying that the unifying theme is a powerful and resonant one that merits the rigorous workout it gets here. The show is a timely rebuke to artists — and they know who they are — who employ their own workforces to crank out soulless manifestations of half-baked ideas.

One quibble might be Girls' Club's continuing reluctance to post wall text to accompany the art. There are no identifying labels; instead, there's a potentially confusing handout to guide you through the show. I prefer the museum approach of providing basic info right on the wall next to the art.

I was surprised to find a genuine art-world classic in the exhibition's video section, which includes seven works of varying length. Peter Fischli and David Weiss' *The Way Things Go (Der Lauf Der Dinge)*, a 1987 short, is widely available via the internet. But its inclusion here is a brilliant stroke, considering how perfectly it fits the theme. For this 30-minute wonder, the Swiss artists holed up in a warehouse and put together an intricate, 100-foot-long structure made up of such everyday objects as tables, tea kettles, tires, balloons, ladders, and countless other items. They then set it in motion with a complex chain reaction involving water, fire, chemistry, and gravity and shot the action in only four or five long takes. If you can spare a half-hour, this ingenious little film, like much of "Set to Manual," will inspire you.