

### Capsule Art Reviews: "Alissa Blumenthal: A Small Retrospective," "Colony Collapse," "Eric Fischl: Cast & Drawn," "Janice Jakielski: Constructing Solitude," "Unwoven Light"

By **Meredith Deliso** *Wednesday, May 1 2013*

**"Alissa Blumenthal: A Small Retrospective"** Let's get this out of the way. In "Alissa Blumenthal: A Small Retrospective," now up at Art Palace, Alissa Blumenthal is not real. The gallery text may try to tell you otherwise. Press materials describe Blumenthal (1899-1995) as an "underappreciated American painter of the 20th century." Among the highlights procured for her bio, she was born in Russia, studied under Malevich, received a harsh review by [Clement Greenberg](#), died in [Brooklyn](#) and was rediscovered in 2011. To the casual gallery goer, it's a fascinating story, but again, one that's entirely made up. This "retrospective" is curated by [Tatiana Istomina](#), a real live artist who's a resident at the Core Residency Program at the [Glassell School of Art](#). She is both the creator of the works on display and the underappreciated Blumenthal. So why such an elaborate, confusing fiction? The answer lies in the works themselves. Istomina has nearly 30 small, mostly gray abstractions on display that are inspired by another time — constructivism. They have clean lines, random characters, and loose doodles and coils. After she painted them, Istomina felt compelled to create this character around them who could justify their existence in 2013. Her interest lies in this bygone period first, in authorship second, if at all. On the one hand, it's a curious, intriguing concept, one that can be appreciated for its creativity and freedom in exploring art history. On the other, it's also pretty cowardly; Istomina doesn't seem to have the confidence to put her name on her work and justify its existence on its own. And for all the attempts to create this fiction in a gallery show, when the pieces are considered outside of the "retrospective," as they inevitably will be, Blumenthal is no longer relevant anyway. She is as nonexistent as she always was, and the work will be judged on its own merits and not on any elaborate, distracting yarn — as it should be. Through May 11. 3913 Main, 281-501-2964. — **MD**

**"Colony Collapse"** [Nicola Parente](#) has a way of getting your attention. Four years ago, it was with giant mushrooms made of peat moss that sprouted from Art League Houston's patio. The piece, a collaboration with [Divya Murphy](#), was in response to a [New York Times](#) article that named Houston the worst recycler among 30 cities in the nation (mushrooms, you see, are natural recyclers). The Houston artist returns with another environmentally themed installation that is, to shamelessly use the pun, creating some buzz. In "Colony Collapse" at micro scope 1824, a boxed-in gallery space at Spring Street Studios, Parente lines the room with more than 2,700 (!) brown paper bags from ceiling to floor — a charming DIY beehive. Fittingly, there are no live bees in this makeshift hive, though the first thing you notice about "Colony Collapse" is the buzzing. It's incessant, and about the last thing you'd expect to hear inside the studio building. Parente has hooked you in. In addition to the sound of

buzzing, a video projected onto one wall of the honeycomb captures a handful of bees at work — a memory of what once was. It's a potent message, the rest of the space notably, loudly empty. To further raise awareness to the issue of colony collapse, a pair of boards on the outside wall provide information on the crisis. Your interaction with the hive is disappointingly limited — as is the nature of the gallery, you can look into the space only through a window and a door. But you are invited to leave a comment on a yellow Post-it note and stick it to the gallery's door, in effect adding a new layer to the hive. Through May 31. 1824 Spring, 713-862-0082. — **MD**

**"Eric Fischl: Cast & Drawn"** There is great range in both subject matter and material in Eric Fischl's "Cast & Drawn" show at McClain Gallery. All figurative works, they convey bodies that are muscular, fat, ordinary and sensual done in bronze, glass, watercolor and pigment inks cast in resin. The impressive skill on display almost comes as no surprise, given that the art icon is famous for his seductive portrayals of the human body. But the 18 pieces in the show also present a rare opportunity to experience both Fischl's 2-D and his 3-D figurative work and witness how he creates elegant, active forms across multiple mediums. The sculptures are particularly elegant, portraying athletes and bodies in motion. *The Dancer* looks ready to pounce, all tense concentration on her tippy toes, while *Swimmer at Rest* looks as pensive as a Rodin. *Tumbling Woman*, Fischl's somewhat controversial homage to 9/11 victims, is referenced in several sculptures, including a piece in glass and another in bronze. The awkward, unnatural pose — the woman is on her back, her legs lifted and held together to her left side — is meant to evoke the bodies that leapt from the [World Trade Center](#) towers. It's a powerful, striking, vulnerable visual, particularly in bronze, even if you don't know the reference. Fischl's colorful resin paintings are a clear departure — if you didn't know any better, you'd think this was a group show. The beach bods depicted are a burnt orange tan, their posture relaxed as they strut around half-clothed or naked. They are completely unself-conscious. His watercolors are more sensual and evocative. Set against a white or splotched background, they are looser, freer depictions of the body and its contours, the subjects stretched out into impossible poses or joined together, indistinguishable from one to the next. A yellowish orange painting of a woman bent over backwards, her arm stretched out in line with her body and her hair flowing beneath her, is particularly breathtaking. Through May 11. 2242 [Richmond](#), 713-520-9988. — **MD**

**"Janice Jakielski: Constructing Solitude"** Janice Jakielski's work somehow manages to feel both futuristic and Victorian at the same time. Her colorful headdresses on display at the [Houston Center for Contemporary Craft](#) are quite photogenic, embroidered prettily with birds and adorned with paper flowers. They also feature some curious fashion choices: coffee mug halves that surround the eyes, wide ribbons that obscure the ears and even a bonnet made for two, each separate headdress connected by a striped portal in a way that forces each wearer's back to the other. These dozen or so hats are purposefully exaggerated, their impracticality meant to enforce a sense of isolation on the wearer. The exhibition is even titled "Constructing Solitude," and sets out to explore how a minor change or two from the norm can radically alter our view of the world. Or something like that. It all can be a bit of a leap. You have to go from merely admiring the skill and craftsmanship in these headdresses to imagining wearing them and how that might feel. Jakielski does give museum-goers the chance to experience, rather than imagine, her work by setting up an interactive installation in the middle of the gallery space. In "Across the Divide," three pairs of handmade binoculars look upon these miniature porcelain nature scenes, which include a pile of leaves and what looks like a cornfield and some weeds. The idea is that when you look through the binoculars, someone else has the opportunity to look through the other pair and you can experience this act of viewing together. Of course, that only works if there's another person there to look through the binoculars with you and you both somehow know what to do. Through May 5. 4848 Main, 713-529-4848. — **MD**

**"Unwoven Light"** Soo Sunny Park's installation at Rice Gallery is unapologetically pretty. It's a glistening, iridescent canopy of shimmering pinks, purples, blues, greens and yellows that resemble anything from a fish's scales to a spider's web wet with raindrops. Despite the apt comparisons, this creation is anything but organic. "Unwoven Light" is composed entirely of chain-link fence and coated Plexiglas that Park has exhaustingly shaped and welded together to create a network of abstract, bulbous shapes suspended from the ceiling. In fact, it took the artist and her assistants two weeks to make just one distinct unit — specifically, seven hours of welding to brace the fencing, 100 hours of tying the wire that holds each Plexiglas piece in place, and still more time cutting the Plexiglas shapes to fit into the chain-link cells. In all, there are 37 such units — 17 newly created for the installation and 20 recycled from a past work — that create patches of light throughout the gallery from floor to ceiling. However laborious its creation, "Unwoven Light" seems effortless, with light doing most of the work. Every step brings you a new combination of colors that reflect off the Plexiglas and bleed onto the walls and even the floor. There's no set path to follow, either, giving you the freedom to wander underneath and around the units in your own trance. There can be much to consider as you explore the work — about the properties of light and color, imposed boundaries and our perception of space — but it's also a pleasant experience that is, simply, joyful. Through August 30. 6100 Main, 713-348-6169. — **MD**