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ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

Review: Welcome to Max Hooper Schneider's disturbing dystopian extravaganza



The Max Hooper Schneider installation at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. (Jeff McLane)

By LEAH OLLMAN

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The Hammer Museum's apse-like Vault gallery is put to spectacular use in Max Hooper Schneider's show, his first solo museum appearance.

Last year, the L.A. artist included two mesmerizing aquarium installations at the gallery Jenny's, using the hobbyist vitrines to conjure miniature consumerist dystopias, shrines to artifice and junk. His singular environment at the Hammer feels like a fleshed-out, amped-up, walk-in version of those pieces, fascinating in its alienness, disturbing in its familiarity.

In the earlier pieces at Jenny's, fish darted among the heaped costume jewelry in one aquarium tank and crustaceans skittered across tangles of women's lingerie in the other. At the Hammer, we are the live occupants of a curious, contrived habitat. We circle a

shallow-walled island of debris as if apart from it, but the sensation is of being submerged along with it.

Schneider has built a meticulous mess of trash and downscale treasure. Every surface is dense with recognizable objects that in this context spell a mystery. Is this an alternate world or the underbelly of our own? Is this a portent of the future or a mirror to the present? The work's title, "Transfer Station," could read multiple ways.

There's an upended shopping cart and a defunct pay phone. A heap of wristwatches and a scatter of pull tabs from beverage cans. A massive Raggedy Ann doll. Tangles of netting and electrical wires. A trophy, a knight's armor, a hand vacuum and a TV remote control. Shell casings by the hundreds.



Detail from the Max Hooper Schneider installation at the Hammer Museum. (Jeff McLane)

This residue of labor and leisure, consumerism, communication technology and violence is partially painted and plasticized in a queasy palette of synthetics, as well as draped in strands of fake pearls and rhinestones and copious earrings, pendants, bracelets and pins.

Plastic ferns, artificial flowers and seaweeds sprout everywhere in false verdancy. The pseudo-tropical lushness gives the scene a strange vitality, as if testifying to the persistence and adaptability of life forms. Two human figures within the tableau have hybridized: one has a fin in place of an arm, and both have seashell-like heads.

Schneider's background encompasses a range of disciplines that all feed into this dystopian extravaganza: marine biology, landscape architecture, design, entomology and social science. It wouldn't come as a surprise to learn that he also studied set design or art direction.

The installation is a persuasive whole, with echoes of "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea," "Raiders of the Lost Ark" and even Pirates of the Caribbean, the ride if not the films. Dioramas were a form of pre-cinematic entertainment, after all, and Schneider completes his with lighting that changes to replicate shifts in time and atmosphere, as well as

a soundtrack (by Jorge Elbrecht) that thickens the experience with its electrical buzzes, theatrical screams and engine noises.

At the rounded end of the apse sits a large disc with raised elements that at first suggests a ritual object, maybe a calendar stone. But no. It turns out to be an oversize replica of an Oreo cookie, emblem of our cultural confusion between objects of consumption and objects of worship. As a dollhouse (another favorite form of Schneider's) is to a real house, an aquarium to the actual sea, so can this environment be regarded as a model — outrageous and incisive — of the beset planetary island we call our own.



The Oreo! A detail from the Max Hooper Schneider installation at the Hammer Museum. (Jeff McLane)

Max Hooper Schneider

Where: Hammer Museum, 10899 Wilshire Blvd., L.A.

When: Tuesdays-Sundays, through Feb. 2

Admission: Free

Info: (310) 443-7000, www.hammer.ucla.edu

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