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## Pair of shows at SECCA reflect efforts of former curator, new curator

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It's a rare occasion that finds the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art's galleries devoted to works by only two artists, but that's the case with its pair of solo exhibitions by Jennifer Meanley and Eric Fertman — young, emerging artists living in Greensboro and New York, respectively.

The two shows also deserve special attention because they mark a change of SECCA's curatorial guard. Meanley's is the last show organized for SECCA by Steven Matijcio, its former curator, and Fertman's is the debut effort by Cora Fisher, on the job at SECCA since last fall.

Aside from those considerations, the shows represent two very different esthetics and make for striking formal and thematic contrasts. Meanley's traditionally grounded, figurative paintings and Fertman's humorous, often art-referenced sculptures might as well come from two different worlds. Seeing them one after another requires an abrupt perceptual shift. But both exhibitions are conceptually rich and visually absorbing — not to be quickly sampled.

Meanley is an assistant professor of art at UNC Greensboro. Her narrative paintings and collage-paintings derive some of their themes from classical mythology and literature. Her most engaging works at SECCA stand as enigmatic comments on human anxieties and untamed nature.

Imagery from a Ray Bradbury novel inspired the title of Meanley's show, "Far Away, in the Meadow." But the landscape in which her stories visually unfold is more jungle than meadow — densely foliated, tangled and wild. Such an unruly landscape is the ostensible subject in several paintings, most strikingly the circular canvases "Green Plow" I and II.

In her more thematically ambitious works the ubiquitous vegetation — overgrown and dappled with camouflage patches of light and shade — impinges almost aggressively on the gaunt figures posed in isolation or in small groups, where they nonetheless appear distracted and disengaged from each other.

The stories Meanley sketches out in her paintings of human subjects are allegories of existential unease. The most dramatic example is the show's centerpiece, a mural-scale collage-painting titled "Melopoeia." The Inferno of Dante's "Divine Comedy" is the source for this panoramic work specially commissioned by SECCA.

A scrawny, central figure wearing only a pair of unbuttoned short pants holds an apparently dead snake in one outstretched hand, while troubled-looking figures in the murky undergrowth suffer their own internal torments and physically externalized tensions. Reinforcing the dark mood of this piece is the black-painted wall on which these cutout components are all pieced together.

Displayed near "Melopoeia," presumably to lend some art-historical context to Meanley's take on Dante, are facsimile reproductions of four visionary drawings by William Blake depicting scenes from the Inferno, made almost 200 years ago.

In addition to the snake in Meanley's commissioned piece, dead or distressed animals also make prominent appearances in several of her other paintings, invariably in connection with human characters. Lying on a table before the man and woman in "When We Fight Like Dogs," for

example, is an apparently dead dog with its underside exposed to reveal a long row of stitches and pink tissue, suggesting the aftermath of highly invasive, failed surgery. Witnessing this ghastly spectacle is a silent chorus of somber-looking figures at the right and several dark, furtive-looking monsters at the left.

Comic relief is readily available in the two adjacent galleries, the site of Fertman's more lighthearted, conceptually based show appropriately titled "A Comic Turn."

Fertman is a clever post-formalist and fun-loving iconoclast, fond of riffing on recent art history and indulging his own visual preoccupations.

Seven notebooks in a vitrine in the Overlook Gallery are open to reveal some of his preliminary sketches for sculptural ideas, especially the spindly forms he calls "boneys." Vaguely reminiscent of skeletons, these sculptures consist of smoothly bulbous forms joined together in various configurations by strategically bent, vertically aligned rods.

Interspersed around the Main Gallery among other sculptures, the boneys are usually unpainted or darkly stained. Some have horsetail-like hanks of hair attached and hanging down, rather like skeletons wearing wigs.

One of the boneys, titled "Pooch," is a quadruped with vaguely canine features, like a stylized poodle. The only yellow-painted boney, titled "Walking and Pissing," is displayed on a black sawhorse table titled "Hole," whose top is made of planks jaggedly broken off at either end. The combination display amplifies the slapstick quality of both pieces.

Fertman employs the breakage motif in a number of other pieces, including his rudimentary construction "Room," a collection of lumber assembled into the bare framework of a three-walled enclosure with what looks like a single-bulb light fixture overhead. In its goofy way, this piece might call to mind both the cube form favored by minimalists and the room format employed by many installation artists. It also suggests the remnants of a broken crate for transporting a large sculpture.

Instead of walls, the sides of "Room" consist of only a few boards splintered at the unattached ends and jutting unevenly between the corners. As if to signify that the piece is complete — a carefully crafted simulation of shoddy construction — all of its components have been painted a uniformly hot pink. The color scheme extends even to the carved wood bulb in the faux light fixture suspended just below where the ceiling would go, if there was one. Otherwise this partial enclosure is occupied only by "Body," one of Fertman's hair-augmented, black-stained boneys. The boneys' bulbous components, vaguely resembling the heads of golf clubs, are at least partly inspired by the clunky, club-foot shoes in many of Philip Guston's late paintings. Other artists either overtly parodied or formally echoed in Fertman's sculptures include Constantin Brancusi, R. Crumb, Kazimir Malevich, Elzie Crisler Segar (creator of Popeye and Olive Oyl) and Dr. Seuss.

Brancusi is apparently a special favorite, judging from the show's several plays on Brancusi's iconic sculptures. For example, Fertman implants a vertical, feather-shaped form borrowed from Brancusi's "Bird in Space" atop a pair of absurdly exaggerated club feet to create "Bird in Space (Pigeon Toe)," a dark-stained, comic homage to both Brancusi and Guston.

The same two artists are also referenced in Fertman's "The Kiss," an adjoined pair of black, club-foot forms paired in a way that recalls the two tightly entwined lovers in Brancusi's sculpture of the same title. And Fertman's identically titled variation on Brancusi's tall, narrow "Endless Column" takes its other formal cue from the white modular pedestals employed elsewhere in the exhibition. Three such pedestals are aligned to display a series of Fertman's smaller wood sculptures, which play amusing variations on ordinary objects including stairs, hot dogs and telephones.

Just as Meanley's exhibition includes a few of William Blake's "Divine Comedy" images for art-historical comparison, Fertman's show is augmented with performance videos by three other artists who have experimented with object-based humor.

In Ger Van Elk's 1969 video, an electric razor is used to shave the bristles off a cactus. Kate Gilmore videotaped herself making a mess while arranging containers of black paint on a shelving unit in 2010. And in a video from 1975, my favorite of the three, Cynthia Maughan documents her construction of a miniature coffin from toothpicks, ostensibly during an extended hospital stay discussed in her voice-over narrative.

The videos might have intruded on Fertman's work had they not been so carefully incorporated into the show, but their strategic dispersal in distinctly separate areas of the gallery gives them just the right weight to complement the main attraction.