

Zellen, Jody. "Pond and Waterfall at Michael's Restaurant," Art and Cake, 13 August 2018.

ART AND CAKE

Pond and Waterfall at Michael's Restaurant

co-organized by Christopher Schwartz and Julia Trotta
Michael's Restaurant
Through September 15, 2018

By Jody Zellen

Michael's Restaurant in Santa Monica has a long history of involvement with art and artists. The walls on the lower level are covered by artworks by well and lesser know artists, many who traded art for meals. Michael and his artist wife, Kim McCarty have collected art since the restaurant's beginning and off and on have hosted exhibitions on the upper levels of the space. Kim curated numerous exhibitions over the years but has recently turned over the reins to Christopher Schwartz who is has curated the current exhibition, "Pond and Waterfall" with Julia Trotta (granddaughter of art historian Linda Nochlin). The exhibition presents works by sixteen artists and takes its title from a film installation by Barbara Hammer (who is included in the show) where the camera moves through a serene pond toward violent waters. Although the film is silent, viewers are invited to listen to their own heartbeat via supplied stethoscopes which becomes the sound track. The curators invite viewers to chart their own trajectory through the works on view thinking about their interconnectedness with respect to the body and the environment.

A good place to begin is with a stunning work by Maren Hassinger, *Our Lives* (2008/2018) in which shredded, twisted and wrapped *New York Times* newspaper pages have been assembled into a giant 72 inch diameter oval. The newspaper shards fill the space in this flower-like relief. Though not entirely readable, fragments of current events direct the viewer's interpretation of the work. Other works with dominant circles are Ray Hamilton's ballpoint pen on paper, *Untitled* (1989) and Ulrike Muller's *Mirrors* (2013), where two circles, one filled the other not are in dialogue on a glossy black surface. In the stairway leading to the gallery space is Amy Yao's 10-inch (diameter) ceramic *Spiral for SONGS (San Onofre Nuclear Generator Station)*, (2018) in which bits of organic looking clay fragments clay are embedded into a small spiral form. Madeline Hollander's, *Temperature Sequence #5: Core Power*, (2018) is an enigmatic work line drawing that outlines dance and warrior poses.

It is hard not to be drawn toward Lea Cetera's wall sculpture, *Sycophant's Lament*, 2018, a funky shelf of arranged cast Styrofoam and plastic cups made from Formica, plywood, porcelain, acrylic, resin, plastic, glass. Other sculptures include two vinyl and fabric works by RM Fisher from 2015 suspended in front of a window and Violet Dennison's *Mirror Stage* (2018) containing the guts of two no longer functional water coolers.

Some walls are hung salon style whereas other are more sparsely populated giving viewers the opportunity to come close as well as look at the pieces from more distant vantage points. It is important to remember that the space is not a conventional gallery, but a utilitarian space that has a window and mirrors, a fireplace, a bar and a long table with chairs. The art must be viewed in this context and thought about in relationship to those eating and drinking in their midst. The works on view have integrity, grit and a commanding presence. They draw viewers in and keep them interested. When having a drink or looking up from conversation it is a joy to be confronted a challenging artworks that invite you to think about the environment and other issues related to the current social and political climate.

On view in a smaller private dining room is a selection of paintings by Rochelle Feinstein from her *Research Park Project*, (2014). These large-scale paintings on unstretched canvas juxtapose quasi-transparent abstract shapes with a dense collage of hand lettered word fragments drawn from figures of speech, phrases, slogans and conversations. They make an interesting backdrop for dinner-table conversations.

It is not and easy task to transform a bar or restaurant space into a viable gallery that provides a meaningful viewing experience and at Michael's restaurant Christopher Schwartz and Julia Trotta are continuing a tradition initiated by Kim McCarty— to bring artwork by young and old, local and international artists together to promote dialogue in a more casual gallery environment.