

"Misako Inaoka, Steven Wirtz Gallery." *Artillery* (November/December 2007)

Conventional wisdom on evolution holds that the best-adapted organisms survive, while defective ones die out. Survival of the fittest implies that all living things who have made it this far are composites of features most suited to their specific life conditions. Domestication complicates these assumptions by eliminating environmental factors that would otherwise destroy maladapted creatures, giving rise to a host of mutations that run counter to the imperatives of the natural world.

Charles Darwin wrote extensively about this phenomenon of more varied mutations appearing in domesticated animals, some of which are cultivated and prized by humans. He focused considerable research on domesticated specimens whose bodies demonstrated a range of variation far greater than what could survive unaided. Sculptor Misako Inaoka, in her first solo exhibition at Stephen Wirtz Gallery, builds on this idea to create a fantasia of mutation which suggests both joy and anxiety at nature's endless variety.

Kyoto-born Inaoka, who lives and works in San Francisco, displays a quintessentially urban Japanese penchant for replicating the living world using obviously manmade materials. She manipulates found objects such as battery-operated animal toys, plastic moss and tiny motors to construct environments where objects fluctuate between animate and inanimate. She plays mad scientist with resin and white paint, dismantling and recombining until pigs fuse with birds, frogs grow antlers, and moss forms into miniature topiaries. Many of her small sculptures are equipped with motion sensors and react to approaching visitors to this cerebral playground.

Inaoka's fantasy is made more compelling through references to scientific methods of delineation and classification, creating an aura of authenticity around her creations. On one wall of the gallery, a group of critters such as two-tailed, headless sparrows are arranged on small shelves in a narrowing lineage of hybrids. Many of these twitch and chirp when triggered. Even when the materials that attach one animal's parts to another's are plainly apparent, the sense is that in the artist's hands these inorganic elements add up to something lifelike.

On another wall, a handsome antique glass and mahogany case holds neatly pinned specimens. This scholarly presentation further enhances the atmosphere of a library or archive, and links Inaoka's representational sculpture to conceptual systems usually applied to abstract or text-based art. In the corners and along the floor, plastic moss grows wild, while white branches that resemble antlers protrude from the walls of this fake wilderness.

Visitors to the show seem pleasantly surprised and amused. The most jaded art patrons are quickly mesmerized by Inaoka's fresh, humorous approach, and it's easy to spend an hour playing with the works. That is perhaps its most successful aspect, as Inaoka subtly penetrates our defenses to engage our hearts and minds alike. A walk through this bizarre fairyland provokes laughter, but also a strong sense of tragedy, as a connection is clearly drawn from these facsimiles to our unhealthy relationship with the planet that nurtures us. Perhaps we humans, with our rudimentary tails, are not so different from Inaoka's truncated, confused creations.