

# LAMENTATIONS AND CRISES

BY MEISHA ROSENBERG

## THESE DAYS: ELEGIES FOR MODERN TIMES

MASS MOCA, THROUGH FEB. 28

AT ITS BEST, THE LEGACY OF CONCEPTUAL art has meant artists synthesize wildly daring ideas in divergent media. I'm thinking of CarianaCarianne, at MASS MoCA's *Believers* a couple years ago; she—rather, “they”—engage with ideas about double identity in video, legal documents, and drawings. At its worst, though, conceptual art panders to elaborately footnoted trends in post (fill-in-the-blank)-ism scholarship that touts the newest technology (animation, computer-generated graphics) while leaving viewers alienated. This overblown conceptualism is one of the problems with *These Days*, which tackles an ambitious topic—loss—but, despite

some individually strong work, doesn't quite get off the ground.

Partly the exhibition suffers because “elegy,” in the subtitle, is too broadly defined and includes religious allegory, urban catastrophe and plain old mortality, among other things. Another weakness is that the six artists have little to say to one another aesthetically. Finally, the disjointed placement of works in a series of loosely connected rooms on two floors leaves much to be desired.

In the first, open, room are Sam Taylor-Wood's excellent time-lapse video, *A Little Death*, which shows a rabbit decomposing, maggots and all, next to an unblemished peach, and the first two sculptures in Robert Taplin's intriguing *Everything Real Is Imagined (After Dante)* (the rest are in a separate, small room). It's a diorama cycle with realistic wax sculptures enacting Dante's *Inferno* for the contemporary era. Both artists make appropriate introduction to a theme of

lament: A midlife Dante gets numbly out of bed, while Taylor-Wood's shriveling rabbit is a mesmerizing example of mortality. But that's pretty much where the similarity ends. Where Taylor-Wood's video keeps a cool still-life distance, in Taplin's work, the suffering is mediated and interior: One scene depicts Dante at a dining table with Beatrice and Virgil. Taplin also imagines generalized, societal strife with a destroyed cityscape in dramatic perspective—Dante's “great plain full of torment and pain” (Canto 9).

Awkwardly continuing around a corner are more photos by Taylor-Wood but from different projects: Clowns lurking in decaying urban environments are from her *After Dark* series, while images of the Yorkshire moors (from *Ghosts*) seemed to me oddly emotionally blank. According to the exhibition pamphlet, they were inspired by *Wuthering Heights* and depict “thwarted love and suffering.” Making for an even more fragmented experience,

Taylor-Wood's work continues upstairs with a film of a man playing air cello, and her wonderfully gentle photograph *Escape Artist (Primary Colours)*.

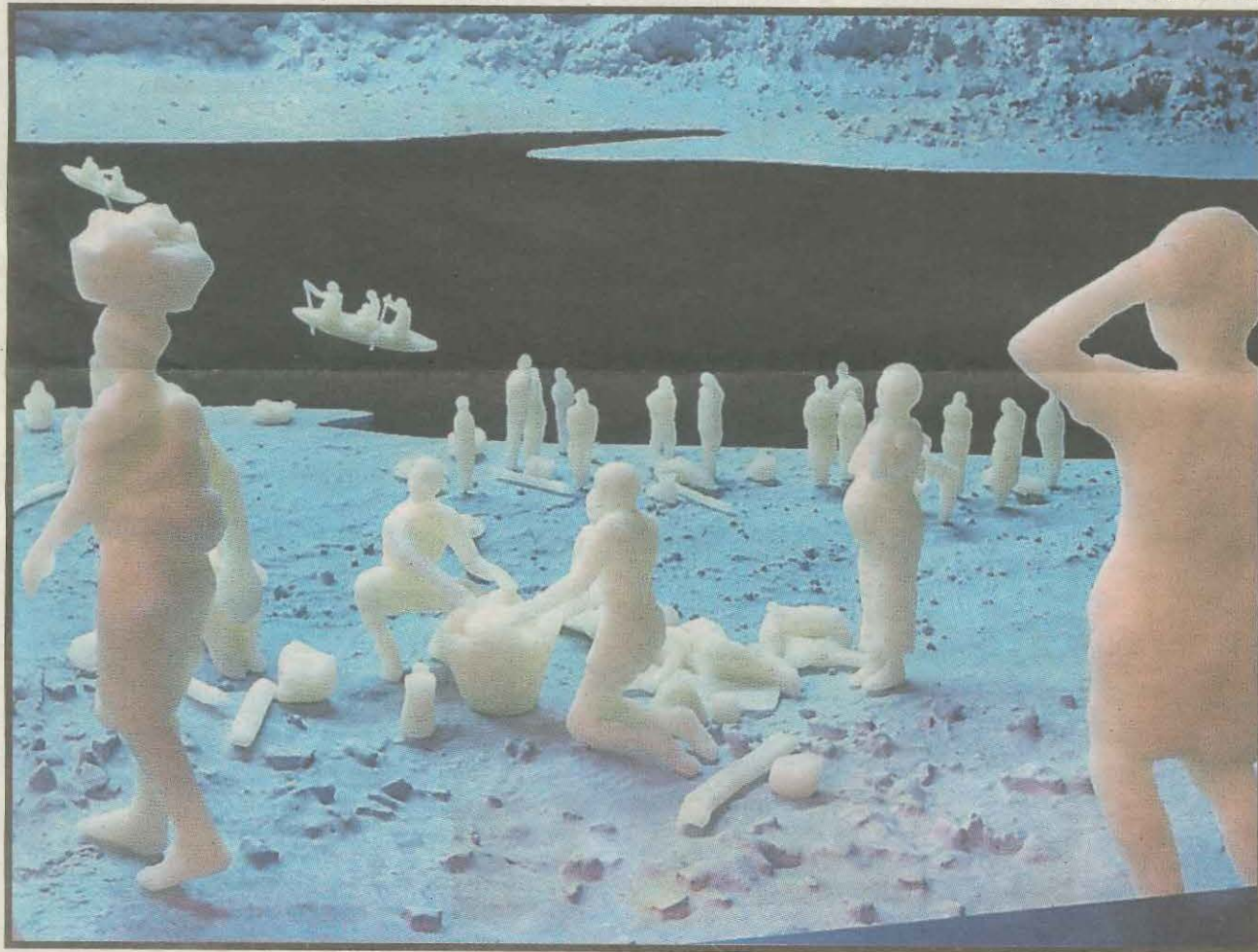
But before we can begin to piece together these disparate threads of loss, we're off on another conceptually loaded tangent with Micah Silver's *The End of Safari*, placing us in a room with palm plants, benches and a “libretto performed by a fictional Yves Saint Laurent” (in reality a vocalist from the U.K., Yvon Bonenfant), which, we are told, references Laurent's safari jacket. The disappointingly thin decor was like a tiki-themed college dorm party. Maybe that's Silver's point—that tropical conquest is a played-out fantasy—but can't hackneyed fantasies be visually imaginative?

In another room, Chris Doyle's *Apocalypse Management* (telling about being the one being living), a large-scale animated video of urban catastrophe, is a more fully realized vision of loss and suffering. Cartoon figures emerge, struggling to move on a screen, first blank, that then divides into panels (sometimes horizontal, sometimes vertical) as layers of vibrantly colored fallen buildings and infrastructure appear, crushing or impaling the people. The figures sing in fragments of hauntingly mournful opera in this impressive animation that borrows from Renaissance depictions of the last judgment.

You must walk *behind* the screen of *Apocalypse Management* for George Bolster's riveting installation, *Reckoner* (which does resonate with Doyle's animation). It's worth the detour; Bolster's flat, doe-eyed rock-icon-styled saints drawn in fine lines on the ceiling wear headphones and hold images of nuclear bombs; the best part is their eyes actually weep, and water puddles on the floor. A Radiohead song plays, and a suspended narwhal—referring to Christ—bleeds red ribbons. Individual panels in a nearby room depict things like *La Vierge et L'enfant et Son Dior* (the Virgin and child—and a Christian Dior label).

Then you head back around and upstairs for Pawel Wojtasik's panoramic film, *Below Sea Level*, shown on a huge circular screen. Unfortunately, Wojtasik's slowly unfolding images of the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway and Mardi Gras Indians do not add to an already culturally fraught understanding of New Orleans post-Katrina: The panoramic technology was dizzying and distracting more than anything.

Like the film, this bumpy show, while it has some highlights, too often falls victim to its own hype. ■



Dante's diorama: Taplin's *Across the Dark Waters*.