

CHICAGO

Dianna Frid

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Botanical gardens are to nature what art museums are to culture, highly selective showcases in which materials are forcibly recontextualized and arranged in hierarchies for public consumption. They speak about power and hubris, with the quasi-colonialist assumption that nature is ultimately subject to human will, that people in Stockholm



View of "Dianna Frid,"
2006. Foreground:
Island. Background:
Greenhouse and Grove
(all works 2006).

or London or Chicago should be able to see exotic tropical plants all year round. Dianna Frid's installation of four works, part of the Museum of Contemporary Art's ongoing "12 x 12" series surveying emerging local artists, relates a lissome narrative about palm trees and the Palm House at the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew.

The story seems to begin with *Island* (all works 2006), a sculpture of a small island on which grow nine palm trees (actually potted palms). Made of chicken wire, foamcore, painted cardboard, and papier-mâché, the dreamy little desert isle is set in an aqua sea, evoking an unspoiled Arcadian innocence. The focus of Frid's tale (though

the works are not displayed in a particular order) then shifts to *Fleet*, a small piece in washy blue ink on cellophane that shimmers like stained glass. Across the sea sail three ships, model galleons with tinfoil rigging suggestive of the days of the Spanish Main. One of these also carries a tiny cutout photograph of a palm tree. Recalling the export of breadfruit in the 1962 film version of *Mutiny on the Bounty*, this image represents the orchestrated removal of a species from one ecosystem to another, less hospitable one. The culmination of this sequence is *Greenhouse and Grove*, a huge mural-like work extending across two walls of the museum, depicting the sylvan grounds and complex Victorian gingerbread architecture of Kew's glass Palm House.

Silhouetted against a sky of shimmering aluminum foil only occasionally pierced by curvy patches of blue, Frid's cut-paper building has been perforated until it resembles an immense doily. Through its many apertures and cutaway windows, we catch glimpses of the collection therein, which includes green and yellow transplanted palms. Frid presses her aluminum foil over lengths of string, giving her sky a striation that becomes a kind of meandering craquelure. Playful freedom with materials is at the center of Frid's enterprise. Her imagination is both iconographic and formal, and these two facets resonate with and support each other. She makes Kew look both idyllic and imperious, subtly achieving a relaxed essence that's oddly reminiscent of Matisse.

There was a fourth work here, *Well*, which at first glance seems out of step with the rest. Made of bundled cloth samples, it looks something like a baptismal font, with a tall column of Frid's striated aluminum foil rising straight above it. Looking into its cavity, though, one sees more cutout photographs of palm trees, here upside down, as if reflecting a grove now lost. This imbues her *Well* with a votive air, a reminder that ecological disruption cannot occur without cost or regret. Frid's tale is thus wistful and cautionary, and its allusive treatment of the poetics and politics of tropical culling took on special significance in a Chicago museum in the dead of winter.

—James Yood