



Tory Fair's monochromatic "In the Floor" (left) and Vera Iliatova's moody "Star" on display at La Montagne Gallery.

Two artists, at the edges of nature

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Flowers burst out of the walls at La-Montagne Gallery, where sculptor Tory Fair appears to have taken a saw to the pristine borders of the space's white cube. Fair's "Portal" is a small porthole that swells with cast resin blooms, subtly sparkling with glitter as if sprinkled with fairy dust. And that's just the beginning. Fair has cast her own body, nude, poised to peer into what might be holes in the walls and floor, and blossoms swarm out and engulf her.

The installation is charming and creepy. The glitter and profusion of flowers suggests fairies have been at work. "Portal" implies verdant growth just beneath the surface, and while everyone likes daisies, when they roost in the floorboards maybe it's an infestation. The figures riff on Ana Mendieta's environmental pieces of the 1970s and 1980s, in

which Mendieta left an impression of her own body in the earth. Fair's figures are fully present, but being consumed head first by nature — re-appropriated, if you will.

Most pieces are monochromatic. The bubblegum pink "In the Wall 2" has the figure squatting, leaning into the wall. Blossoms erupt and cover her like a lion's mane. In the sooty "In the Floor" she lies on her belly, with black flowers blanketing her head. The latter has an ashes-to-ashes mournfulness about it. Throughout, Fair keeps to the edges; the architectural borders of the gallery become a metaphor for the line between nature and society. A woman's body crossing that line is not a new idea, but Fair's fresh, nuanced take on the concept, especially her use of flowers, brings humor into the balance, and begins to break down an old dichotomy.

Vera Iliatova populates her moody paintings, also at LaMontagne, mostly

with women, who often stand amid pale trees that drop down like gossamer scarves. In "Star" the light shifts from lavender to yellow, and groups of people are almost transparent; it's as if we're looking through veils of different realities.

At the center stands a sad young woman holding what might be a head shot; maybe she wants to be a star. She is in the woods, but the lighting and the way people stand around a clearing behind her also suggest she's at a theatrical event. Iliatova's washes of color and her use of transparency accentuate the protagonist's loneliness. She's also clever with space, evoking distance without losing sight of the relationships among her figures.

Puppet masters

"Extraordinary: Puppetry, Storytelling, & Spirit" at the New Art Center is a fantastical delight. Giant papier-mâché puppets from Bread & Puppet Theatre overflow from the small stage just inside the

gallery door. Ashley Bryan's puppets made from detritus he picks up on walks along the beach are smaller but no less magical. Look at the homely yet godlike "Natambu," which takes its name from a West African word meaning "Man of Destiny," a horned beast with a head made of driftwood, draped in remnants from corduroy slacks. He's majestic.

These figures, along with a terrific assortment of marionettes from Julie Zanes, Donald Saaf, and the Bluebird Theatre, all verge on human but incorporate other attributes. Zanes and Saaf's "The Man on the Moon" has a glossy, pale blue face and a clock in his belly. Tolu Bommallata, Indian shadow puppets also on view made of thinly pounded deer hide, sport many heads and arms. All these puppets represent something human, distilled, and heightened so we can recognize it, and maybe laugh.

"Extraordinary" also features several puppet theaters, fastidiously fashioned