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Upfor Gallery installation: both strange and familiar

By John Motley
Special to The Oregonian

By design, the work in Brenna Murphy's debut exhibition at Upfor Gallery resists easy categorization. Her installation "Lattice-Face Parameter Chant" arranges various individual works — large wooden sculptures resembling insects and sleighs, along with smaller, 3-D-printed replicas of those forms — on a ground of mirrors, painted sand and extraordinarily detailed digital drawings.

Despite it all being so assiduously strange, there's an uncanny familiarity to the fluidly curving contours of the sculptures. They seem at once ancient and futuristic, as a glut of disparate references — from Chinese and Arabic characters to the architecture of Aztec temples to silicon wafers and chipboards — are melted down into an elemental visual vocabulary.

Still, if that visual system can be unpacked, the initial effect it has on a viewer is deeply disorienting. As the ornate patterning of the sculptures echoes in multiple scale shifts, it takes a moment to observe that not only do the shapes repeat, but a precisely calibrated visual sys-

Review

Brenna Murphy: "Lattice-Face Parameter Chant" and MSHR: "Liquid Hand"

Where: Upfor Contemporary Art, 929 N.W. Flanders St., 503-227-5111

Hours: 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays

Closes: Nov. 30

Admission: Free

Website: upforgallery.com

tem is at work.

In part, the various materials Murphy uses on the gallery's floor complicate this moment of recognition. Mirrors create the illusion of dropped recesses, where the reflected sculptures continue into infinity, and, in the flat dimensionality of her digital drawings, the floor's surface feels intact. This tension between the reflective and the opaque suggests a division between virtual space and reality, while reminding that, for much of her output, the artist's studio is a screen.

For all its cool formalism, there's an appealingly naïve quality to Murphy's vision. The installation's elaborate construction recalls a child-like fascination with build-

ing and navigating labyrinths, not unlike Chris Burden's installations built with Meccano and Erector sets or the wildly imagined terrain of Mike Kelley's "Kandor" series, which presented the fictional home of Superman in colorful miniature. It's a contagious effect for viewers: Studying the detailed work feels much like the telescoped look of peering into a doll house.

The installation's capacity for immersive play is critical for Murphy. In November, she and frequent collaborator Birch Cooper, who create interactive environments with playable electronic instruments as MSHR, will reconfigure the exhibition for the second month of its run. Titled "Liquid Hand," this month's version of the show reimagines Murphy's installation as a stage, an environment to inhabit.

As she and Cooper activate the work in new ways, they assert that "Lattice-Face Parameter Chant" was not an end in itself, but rather one of many possible configurations. In this way, Murphy ignores the endgame of exhibiting for something more infinite: the thrilling reveal of the next move.

At Upfor Gallery, Brenna Murphy's "Lattice-Face Parameter Chant" blends the ancient and the futuristic.

EVAN LA LONDE

