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New show at Neubauer Collegium is a different take on flower power



The central table of Martha Rosler's photography at the Neubauer Collegium's "Passionate Signals" exhibition. (Photo by Aaron Gettinger)

By AARON GETTINGER

Staff writer

A new show at the Neubauer Collegium asks viewers to consider the work that goes into flowers from industrial to domestic contexts through the work of Martha Rosler, a conceptual artist and avid gardener who rose to world renown for her feminist art in the 1970s.

"She's primarily known for very emphatically political work," said curator Dieter Roelstraete, adding that Rosler is best known in the art world for her prodigious photography and a "recurring preoccupation with the floral motif." The gallery, 5701 S. Woodlawn Ave., has a relatively small footprint, Roelstraete said, and is conducive to an exhibition highlighting just one particular aspect of her oeuvre.

"The aspect that she agreed we zoom in on is that of this undercurrent in her photographic work of an interest in pictures of gardens, flowers, domestic labor, the idea of the flower as this

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universal symbol of beauty or redemption and femininity — the labor that is of course always coded female,” Roelstraete continued.

“B-52 in Baby’s Tears” (1972) is the oldest work on display, in which the outline of a bomber is formed from the namesake plant. On the wall are a series of floral embroideries Rosler made, with two photographs taken with a toy camera and three videos on the walls. Most notable of them is “Backyard Economy I,” which depicts farm workers tending to Southern California flower fields in 1974.

“This is, in a way, the key to the show in that it directly shows the social cost of producing this very innocent picture of beauty,” Roelstraete said. “It’s just the last thing that you ever think of when you see a flower or a bouquet — what did it cost, in a way?”

Sixty-one of Rosler’s photographs dated from November 1990 to last month lay on a table in the middle of the gallery, taken from backyards to monumental civic botanic gardens and many places in between.

“I don’t photograph *a* flower,” Rosler said at the show’s Sept. 17 opening reception. “I photograph something of the context.”

In sum, the “Passionate Signals” exhibition is meant to “highlight the social, political and economic costs of producing beauty at its most innocuous and/or seemingly natural,” framing “unassuming wonders of nature as sobering social facts” through snapshot and street photography, according to the artistic statement.

There are no prairies, mountain views or rivers in “Passionate Signals” — no untouched vistas — just invented green space that fits the societal vision of what urban and domestic habitats should be.

“I’m essentially a conceptual artist, and I work with photography and video and questions of landscape and architecture, the built environment, homelessness, war, the national security state and feminism,” Rosler explained. “Space and power, and the creation of that space that is then naturalized and the relegation of a kind of landscape being to men but the garden and backyards to women.”

“I seem to be unable to think about anything else!” she said, laughing. “I’m always interested in questions of value and what we think is beautiful or worth a lot versus the mundane.”

Rosler conceded that the viewer must want to see “the shuttling back and forth between the question of the male, the question of the female” in her work: “The photos are mute: they don’t tell you they are part of an investigation.”

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“This is an intellectual space,” she said. “This is the collegium in a university ... The fact is that photographs of flowers are actually something people really enjoy seeing, in my opinion. And there are over 70 photos here, so you can just look at the photos — they’re really diverse.

“They don’t present a single mode of presentation. It’s many modes of presentation.”

“Passionate Signals” is open through Jan. 31, 2020.