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arts
entertainment

hairpieces

Babs Reingold grabs us by the short and curlies with two engrossing shows. ■ BY MEGAN VOELLER

Labyrinth: Current Millennium

The Studio@620, 620 First Ave. S., St. Pete. Runs through July 15, www.studioat620.com.

Fallout: Beauty Lost and Found

The Arts Center, 719 Central Ave., St. Pete. Runs through July 8, www.theartscenter.org.

When Babs Reingold began collecting secrets last year, she plundered her address book. She sent out an e-mail to just about everyone she knew, inviting them to submit their innermost confidences anonymously via her website (www.babsreingold.com). As the confessions began to pour in, Reingold occasionally wondered, who could this be and do I know them?

You would wonder too, if your entreaty yielded such gems as "I pooped on the church's lawn once." Other slightly more garden-variety confessions own up to enjoying the occasional puke or wank at the office. Whether to take them all at face value provided a challenge to Reingold — indeed, she deemed some too farfetched to use — and she passes that challenge on to you, dear visitor.

Transformed into a spoken word track, the secrets form the audio backdrop of an immersive installation at the Studio@620. The work sinks its hooks into you the moment you walk through the door. Before you can duck behind the curtain that conceals the installation, a video monitor flashes scenes from inside, surveillance-style. In an instant, Reingold thrusts you into the role of voyeur.

Beyond the curtain, she creates a life-sized metaphorical construction of the unconscious mind: a labyrinth. A spiral of tea and rust-stained silk organza is clearly impassable, destined to remain unexplored; if the pendulous, hand-made silk organza bags full of hair don't make that clear, a trail of silken intestine (or excrement?) emerging from the spiral center and a sprinkling of fallen hair on the ground provide further beautiful/repulsive obstacles.

Light bulbs flash on and off as moments of insight amid the bags of hair — organic stand-ins for memory. The light casts long shadows on white walls and bathes the room in the organza's peachy-brown tones. The ongoing confessions begin to overlap and eventually reach a crescendo of incomprehensibility before falling silent, then begin again.

Reality never fully reveals itself, Reingold suggests; instead, it's constantly flirting with contradiction. Hair symbolizes vitality, is lovingly coiffed and petted, then becomes the unattractive detritus of everyday life. Secrets drift between memory and fantasy — part fetish, obsession and rebellion. Eventually, their authenticity seems irrelevant — the more you listen, the more they merge with your own. (OK, maybe not the one about the church lawn...)

In a separate body of work on view at the Arts Center, Reingold twists strands of her own hair into playful gestures she calls "hair doodles." (In contrast, the masses of hair in the installation are solicited from salons.) Each doodle represents a day's worth of hair culled from her hairbrush, shower drain, etc. Four months of specimens line the gallery walls.

She stuffs each tiny tangle into a plastic baggie and dates it, later



SECRETS: Reingold's "Labyrinth: Current Millennium," mixed media installation (2006).

returning to dissect the strands and arrange them into a lyrical gesture. Some strands entwine to become one thick rope of hair; other lone tendrils fly away with rebellious abandon. Curves, circles and ellipses define the gestures, which range in complexity from loosely knotted rings to a group of longer strands looped and twisted into a crucifix.

The kinky structure of Reingold's naturally curly hair aids her efforts to twist and tuck. No particular event precipitated the hair loss documented by the daily collection, and though the artist assigns some blame to a prescription drug, she points to the passage of time as the main culprit.

As a meditation on the vulnerability of beauty to age, the project will strike a special chord with some. There's also a powerful transformation of the quotidian — even disgusting — litter of our physical existence into something gently beautiful. With both the hair doodles and the installation, Reingold starts with natural, and in some cases humble, materials and imbues them with mystery.

Mysteries, I should say, because Reingold rearticulates the hair doodles as graphite drawings, first at the same scale as the originals on a long strip of paper hanging above the baggies, then as large-scale

drawings uniting a month's worth of doodle shapes on a 4-foot-square sheet of paper. The linear, at-scale strip of doodle drawings suggests a filmstrip or animation, watching organisms cavort in a Petri dish.

The large-scale drawings, in which some doodles grow to become relaxed, confident gestures, while others shrink and congregate in tiny clusters, provide even more interpretational latitude. The drawings resemble astral maps, with stray hairs tracing paths across the night sky, doodles as constellations.

I found my eyes doing the dance they usually reserve for graphic novels, of all things — reading the doodles, comparing their relationships to each other, toying with the barest hint of a broader narrative for each month of gestures. What is a doodle, after all, but a tiny preverbal articulation of thought, the symbolic equivalent of the floating cloud above a comic book character's head? (I know I'm always mining mine for the obvious Freudian signposts — aren't you?)



TWIST AND TUCK: "Hair Doodle 03/05" (detail), graphite on paper, 48" x 48" (2006).

THIS ASIDE can't begin to do them justice, but the Arts Center — in typical fashion — bursts at the seams right now with the work of three other talented and diverse artists. The current slate of exhibits comes down after July 8, so don't dally.

Melissa Gwyn's paintings erupt with organic life. Thick impasto covers the surface of wood panels like barnacle growth; blossoms and veined leaves glow in saturated pastels.

Gary Chapman's eerily realistic portraits of adults and children interchange limbs and skin from different races and genders. A mask of skin peels away from several of the figures' faces, suggesting emergence from a human cocoon.

Literal seam-bursting might be involved in the case of Jennifer McNeely, who stuffs bras and stockings almost to popping and sews them into creations suggestive of both fashion accessory and prosthesis. "fatty" (2005), a stuffed nylon tube with a plastic belt buckle, proffers a detachable love handle. Bras sewn together so that the cups create one big sac, stuffed, and lined with fur, dangle from hooks in the wall. I can only call them pussy purses — and art doesn't get much more fun than that, folks.

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