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With Mooney's sculpture, 1st step is not stepping on art

By Glen Helfand Published 10:48 am, Monday, July 6, 2015

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**IMAGE 1 OF 4**

K.r.m. Mooney's art, such as "Circadian Tackle I," is made of industrial materials.

The first, not insignificant challenge to viewing **K.r.m. Mooney's** elusive but rewarding exhibition at the **Wattis Institute** is to recalibrate your perspective. There is little on the wall in this minimal collection of works made from deceptively prosaic materials. You have to look down, up and around to notice the small monochromatic sculptures that seem perfectly at home on the cool concrete floor. The sculptures are small tangles of industrial materials, works made from wire, cable, electrical conduit and various pieces of hardware arranged in seemingly loose configurations.

Viewers have to navigate the room carefully to observe the pieces but also to avoid stepping on them.

The objects do employ a few precious metals, such as silver-plating, and may involve casting lavender (itself a material that secretes oils and scents with healing properties), but the sense of beauty is more industrial. The work's appeal stems from the refined, mercurial quality of the ingredients, particularly when they are heated and fluid during a production process. Mooney works with the idea of alchemy and shift.

The young Oakland artist studied jewelry making and metalwork at **California College of the Arts**, and this bit of information proves instructive, though it also thwarts expectations. The idea of jewelry is here expressed not through conventional dazzle but through scale, potency and material preciousness. The works might veer to the more derogatory nature of the term in that they are defiantly marginal in scale and placement in places that require effort to view and comprehend.

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There are wires that appear to have been clipped in an act of thievery. The wire curves though are industrially strong, while a material listed as grafting ribbon in a piece titled "**Joan Green**, Bimetal III' (all works 2015) takes on a softer, more pliable profile. It recalls 1960s minimalist works by **Robert Morris**, though Mooney's version is more diminutive, and more dangerous — like a flogging device. The material attached to an armature includes a fluorescent light rod and a cord that could be plugged into an electrical outlet; the gas in the bulb is dormant, never activated.

You have to look up to see "Taxis Commons," which is itself a configuration of standard fluorescent tubes, here illuminated, suspended from the ceiling in a utilitarian rectangle. The lighting allows us to see the room, but also serves as an armature for a few wispy objects that seem parasitically attached. The checklist describes them as "organic compound casts in lavender, citrus, skin, foxtails," elements that are ambiguous in their identity — are they natural or artificial?

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A brochure with an elliptical text by curator **Anthony Huberman** calls for an attention to "porous boundaries," which can apply to formal and metaphorical aspects of these works. As an artist, Mooney's challenge is to offer entry to this conceptually driven practice, which will be a hard sell for many viewers. The show needs time and focus, and probably requires reading the aforementioned brochure or talking to a gallery sitter. There are rewards if you can break through the threshold.

That idea is illustrated, in an earnestly playful manner, in a piece titled "Architecture for Those of the Mud and the Sky," made from, among other things, a "K-9 composite high performance pet door." The white surface is icy in demeanor and seems like part of the building infrastructure. You have to crouch to see that the embossed brand name is facing toward the wall. We are on the inside and can imagine an escape into a rabbit hole by crawling through. Behind the cool veneer, such gestures reveal Mooney to be an emerging artist with notable promise.