

Jude Griebel: Crafting Ruin

by Agnieszka Matejko



There aren't many shows you can take children to, but *Crafting Ruin* at dc3 Art Projects in Edmonton is one of them. Kids love a gallery populated with creepy, google-eyed cartoonish characters that seemingly writhe and wriggle on skinny legs. There's plenty of storybook narrative here too. For instance, in *Billow*, a puffy figure emerges in the form of smoke. It swells and rises from the chimney of a miniature building with a bright red roof and elfin doors and windows.

Yet, this playful show by Jude Griebel, a 2014 MFA graduate from Montreal's Concordia University who is quickly garnering national and international exposure, is deceptive. The show, which runs to April 15, carries dark

poetic metaphors that only adults can appreciate. Griebel, who splits his time between New York and the Alberta town of Sundre, arranges it as a formal sculpture garden complete with an ornate fountain that spews brown water into a filthy pool filled with pop cans. Sculptures on plinths built from concrete blocks surround this satirical scene; far from being traditional seductive nudes, they are oily black or sickly green humanoid figures that seem to squirm as a bulldozer or excavator rips into their bodies.

An epic struggle rages. These storybook characters are an environmental battleground. For instance, *Greaser* – whose body looks like petroleum oozing from an oil tanker – eloquently illustrates the blurred boundary between humans and the environment. We ingest the toxins we toss into streams, and fill our lungs with the same brown smoke we spew into the sky. Like the mythical ouroboros snake that eats its own tail, we devour and deplete nature, and bit by bit, the environment devours us.

The show explores a defining, if bleak, issue of our time with a whimsical take that makes it palatable. Yet there's an unwelcome irony. Bones, seashells and wood aside, the main material used in Griebel's works is epoxy resin. This pre-polymer, petroleum-derived product is a plastic in its final form. Epoxy is a major source of occupational asthma, and many epoxy resins are made with Bisphenol A, the toxic compound that leaches out of baby bottles. Griebel's art makes a powerful statement about the perils of environmental degradation using the very material it condemns.

This is a problematic choice in the field of ecologically focused art. Some artists, such as Aurora Robson, create sculpture from recycled trash to lessen the environmental footprint. Others, like British artist Andy Goldsworthy, work mainly outdoors with leaves, sticks or ice – materials that leave little trace. At a time when scientists warn a breaking point is at hand, visceral exhibitions that depict the perils of environmental degradation are needed. While it's impossible for artists to avoid collective complicity for ecological damage, the commentary inherent in their work is strongest when they moderate its materiality. No matter how great the poetry, the medium is also the message.