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Almost Blue 2008, urethane auto enamel over epoxy and carbon fiber, cast optical resin, 8.5 x 128 x 58 inches

DANGEROUS ALLURE ***DEAN SNYDER: ALMOST BLUE***

Nadine Wasserman
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Wouldn't it be great if the images sent from NASA's Phoenix Mars Lander looked like something out of Dr. Seuss? In my imagination, the red planet looks less like a drab desert of rock, crater and volcano than like the current exhibition on the second floor of the Tang Museum. *Dean Snyder: Almost Blue* is a dimly lit installation of nine sculptures against a backdrop of brown walls. This was a smart move. Without the moody, cavelike atmosphere, Snyder's sculptures could easily come across as kitschy and garish. Instead, the overall experience is like being transported to another realm.

The sculptures included are from a new body of work that Snyder has been making over the past year and a half. They are the result of 10 years of experimentation, and represent a significant mid-career shift. Snyder, who cut his teeth as a studio assistant to Martin Puryear, has been known mostly for work using organic materials such as wood, rawhide, and iron. This current body of work is an eye-popping fusion of surreal yet organic imagery with high-tech materials and processes. Think hot rod meets high art. Snyder uses the same paint that is used to "kustomize" cars, motorcycles, and boats. His color choices are seductive. There are molten greens, deep reds, and shimmering purples as well as shiny blacks and opalescent whites. While each of the works could stand alone, they are meant, in this exhibition, to be considered as a coherent group.

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The title of the exhibition references Elvis Costello and Chet Baker; however, there is no overarching narrative. Instead, Snyder has created a variety of emotional responses that encompass both childhood memories and current events, and that are influenced by source material ranging from honky tonk to Bernini. The intense, showy colors emerge from memories of summers at the Jersey Shore with its bright lights, boardwalks, and arcades coupled with seedy sideshows and strip clubs. The flamboyance and tawdriness of Snyder's summers contrast with his home on a farm in Pennsylvania where he inherited a sensible work ethic. These two opposing factors—pragmatism and rebellion—drive his art. Other influences include cartoons, tattoos, and art historical and mythological references, but ultimately, as Snyder explains, it is “the realm of material possibilities that motivate my alacrity to innovate form through idiosyncratic processes.” Snyder, particularly with this body of work, is committed to process and materials.

The materials Snyder uses in his new body of work include carbon fiber, epoxy composite, cast optical resin, stainless steel, metal flake paint, and urethane auto enamel. Color has become an important element in his work, as has the way it appears, whether applied or coming from the material itself. In most cases, the paint process is labor-intensive and time-consuming, requiring many layers and an even application. While the work is mostly handmade, Snyder does use machinery such as computers and laser cutters.

The very first piece one encounters upon entering is the site-specific *Arachna's Arcade*. This giant web hanging from a corner of the entryway no doubt references Greek mythology, but also the arcades of Snyder's youth, and it sets the tone for the exhibition. Cut by machine, it does not have the elasticity or delicacy of a real web. It hangs ominously as if attempting to deter us from the sparkly allure of the objects beyond. It functions much like a fortune teller's curtain used to maintain mystery yet entice curiosity. It appears both alluring and dangerous, much like many of the works included. Upon entering there is *Daphne's Pendant*, a graceful sapling form protruding from a shimmering red blob and topped by two red pitcher-plant flowers, a carnivorous plant. The shape of this piece echoes Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne*. Its delicate beauty appears both mournful and ominous. Its melancholy is interrupted by *HooDoo*, just behind it. *HooDoo*, despite its reference to a vertical rock spire, is sparkly and squat and peppered with embedded eight balls. Off to the side and contained within a glass walled nook is *Amnesia*, a viscous, cloudy orange puddle from which protrude several poppy stems and pods. Similar to *Nepenthe* in the next room, it references the allure and danger of narcotics. *Nepenthe* also sports a pitcher-plant flower, this one neon green. Nearby is *Oracle*, a bright pink rock with gelatinous green drips hanging off it.

Taken as a whole, the exhibition is visually stimulating. The colors, forms, and materials are enough to engage the viewer without what Snyder explains is the “complex and illusive theoretical meaning” of sculpture. In a sense, there may be too much to think about. If you do want to know more you can go to Snyder's lecture on June 24 at 7 PM. Personally, I am content to have marveled at the construction of the work without too much background information. This is unusual for me because I am a big fan of making contemporary art accessible. But this work is accessible on many levels. And it is also brave. These days it is not easy for an artist to change his signature style mid-career. Despite the economy, the art business is booming, and according to Julia Chaplin in last Sunday's *New York Times*, it is “increasingly a blood sport,” as collectors compete for work and dealers require that their artists continue to churn out work that is recognizably theirs. Perhaps this is part of Snyder's narrative—that with decadence there is destruction.