

# Weekend

Arts & Performance

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## Weird science





# Visions of a mutant future grow out of Hieronymus Bosch's 'Garden' in MassArt's new show

By Christine Temin

GLOBE STAFF

The "Garden of Earthly Delights" by Hieronymus Bosch is a touchstone of weirdness in art history, an early-16th-century painting that illustrates, in the most extravagantly inventive images, an orgy bracketed by scenes of Eden and hell. That large central panel celebrates lust in as many permutations as Bosch could come up with — and that was a lot. The Kama Sutra has nothing on this

## Art Review

painting.

The Bosch is also the touchstone of "Earthly Delights," a sensational show at the Massachusetts College of Art organized by the school's curator, Lisa Tung, who finds a resonance between contemporary and medieval art. (The 16th century is a very late date for calling a work "medieval," but in its scare tactics and sorcery the Bosch qualifies; no Renaissance humanism for this artist.)

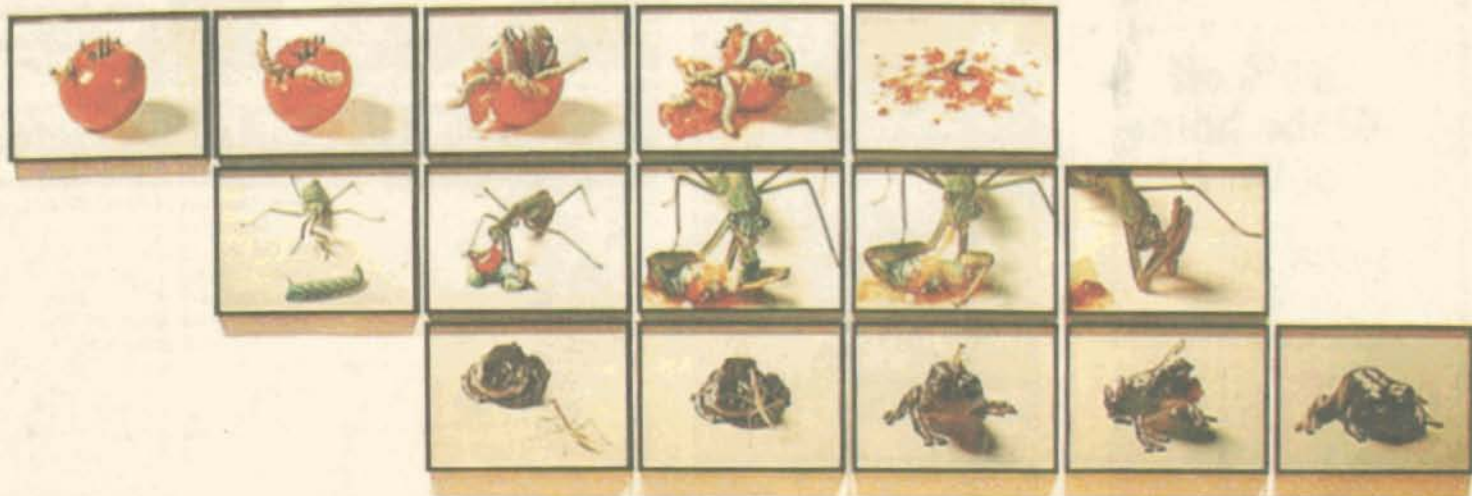
In today's uncontrollable deadly viruses and infected food, Tung sees a 21st-century equivalent of the plague, the scourge of Bosch's time, and she sees similar outbreaks of religious hysteria in both eras. Many of her curatorial colleagues, meanwhile, are producing a steady stream of shows that point to a future of cloning and other sorts of stage-managed biology.

There's overlap between Tung's take on the mutant theme and that of curators more interested in sci-fi. The "Food Chain Series" of color photographs by Catherine Chalmers is in Tung's show — and was also part of the "Unnatural Science" exhibition at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art a couple of years ago, a show that focused on what new technology and science will mean for the future of the planet. The Chalmers photographs are gorgeous arrangements of lush colors against stark white, depicting not-so-gorgeous subjects including a praying mantis enticing her mate, using him, and then eating him. While a no-no for hu-

"EARTHLY DELIGHTS," Page C20



Top: Nature is subverted in works by Dean Snyder (left), Ryan McGinness (right), and Gina Ferrari (foreground). In "Self Portrait in a Fiery Sea" (center) and "Self Portrait as Astyanax" (above), Julie Heffernan creates complex, Old Masterish works.



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# The future isn't bright in 'Earthly Delights'

## ► "EARTHLY DELIGHTS" Continued from Page C15

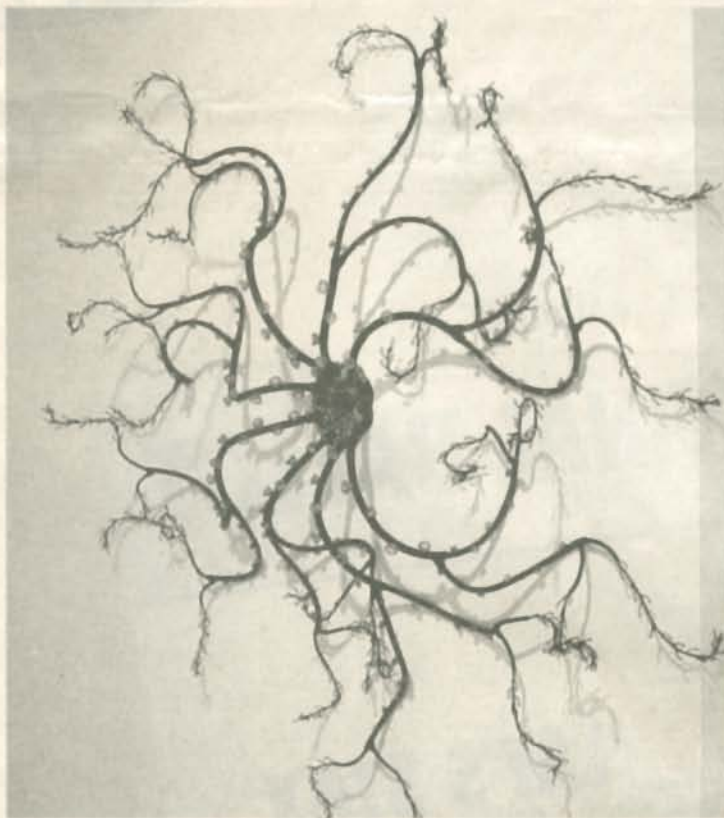
mans, for insects it's a tidy way of dealing with the general messiness of sex — and it dovetails with Bosch, who included a food chain image in his "Garden."

Tung's show features 14 artists from Boston, New York, and the West Coast whose work is all very much in tune. And, in a few cases, she's found artists other than the usual subjects, so the show is unpredictable.

You don't necessarily look at individual pieces and think "Bosch," but as a whole, even without the show's give-it-away title, you probably would. Bosch was hardly the first artist to depict animal/human hybrids: Four millennia before he came on the scene, the Egyptians were turning out sphinxes with the head of a ruler emerging from the body of a lion. Egyptian hybrids had a particular purpose: Sphinxes were guardian figures. Bosch's hybrids seem to exist purely for debauchery, although scholars have yet to agree on the precise meanings of his most complex painting.

Bosch's shadow certainly hangs over Amy Ross's huge mural "Feed." A Boston artist, Ross is one of the stars of this show. She's known for benign images of animals set against colorful striped grounds, but Tung's theme has made her detour into darkness — most successfully. A goat being hatched from an egglike orb sucks at an udder that drops from a plant that in turn drops from a claw. Nature has been perverted. It's also been drained of color. This chilling imagery is in neutral tones, with a pale brown wash dripping down over it, like a dirty rain. Ross's flora-and-fauna combo-creatures are limned in such delicate detail that they assume the authority of a Leonardo drawing of a science experiment.

The exhibition's other mural, Ryan McGinness's 35-foot-long untitled latex and vinyl piece crammed with rambunctious imagery, is at first reminiscent of Kara Walker's works. Both artists use the silhouette, Walker to depict scenes of racial injustice, violence, and rape in the Old South, McGinness to create less legible narratives. The works of both pack a one-two punch: First you notice the quaint form, then comes the "Wham!" of the subjects. McGinness builds his piece on a structure of abstract swirls in white and chocolate brown, set against a screaming pink ground. Some of the vignettes have clusters of tiny white dots around them. Like bursts of fireworks, the dots de-



A few tentacles in Megan Cronin's "Scavenger" turn the corner of the wall, as if preparing to attack what's on the other side.

mand your attention.

McGinness is on image overload. Among those in the MassArt mural: an upside-down castle; corporate logos; fruit that looks like testicles, except that it has leaves (fig leaves?); a unicorn; jaunty mushrooms; and a lot of other stuff. Some of the hybrids are reminiscent of characters in Disney's "Fantasia."

McGinness's impenetrable jungle has companions within the exhibition, although of lesser quality, including Tomas Vu-Daniel's "Opium Dream" mixed media pieces and Steve DiBenedetto's dense drawings and paintings that, despite their overall abstraction, suggest the massive movement of a planet in upheaval.

Like Ross and McGinness, Gina Ferrari works big. What's growing in her "Garden" — a 15-by-22-foot floor piece — is pig fetuses lying in clumps, about to be attacked by snakes, symbol of an Eden about to end. The individual elements are made of cast plaster in a shiny, pale pink that should come across as sweet but is sinister instead: The color is intentionally at odds with the content.

Nearby is a solitary and relatively small untitled white plaster piece by Amy Podmore that more than holds its own in the context of the neighboring giants. One of the most successful — and self-contained — works in the show, it's a distortion of the classical footed urn. Podmore's piece is a

## Earthly Delights

At: the Bakalar Gallery of the Massachusetts College of Art, 621 Huntington Ave., through March 17.

ripe, round jug squatting on bent legs and firmly planted feet. It's an intensely feminine work: The jug is a vessel about to disgorge its contents, adopting the birthing position women in many cultures assumed before obstetricians told them to lie down.

The best part of Megan Cronin's wall sculpture "Scavenger," a circle of black tentacles suggesting a mutation of either octopus or spider, is its sneakiness: A few of the tentacles turn the corner of the wall, as if preparing to attack what's on the other side.

The most renowned figure in the show is the late filmmaker Stan Brakhage: Tung includes him on his own merits, of course, but also because he happened to have titled a brief film after the Bosch. To achieve the fleeting, grainy film snippets, Brakhage taped parts of flora and fauna to perforated tape (in lieu of celluloid), then ran the tape through a projector in order to create the jumpy sequences from raw materials, without the intervention of a camera.

Katy Stone paints clouds or flowers on Mylar cutouts, pinned a few inches away from the wall so they cast interesting shadows. Both subjects spew blood: The clouds produce red rain; the flow-

ers leak, like pricked fingers. They're nice, but they're outclassed by the work of Wojciech Wolynski, a MassArt faculty member who also draws on a clear surface, Plexiglas in his case. In the center of each Plexi panel is a tiny animal fantasy so obsessively drawn that you can count the individual toes on a two-headed ostrichlike creature that's no more than 3 inches tall.

The subject of this show lends itself to the use of bizarre materials, including rawhide, which Dean Snyder soaks, sews, and inflates into bulbous shapes he then tattoos with sexually suggestive — though generally nonspecific — images. Straining to get off the wall or writhing on the floor, these outsized blobs are bloated with anticipation.

Papier-mache is the mainstay of Michelle Segre's freestanding sculptures, related to Snyder's in their phallic form. They are, however, billed as fantasy cacti, made in the shapes and hues of drippy ice cream cones. The little spikes protruding from them can be read as prickly — or tickly.

The artist with the richest ties to the past is the painter Julie Heffernan, who makes her self-portrait the center of works that borrow directly both from individual works including the Velazquez "Las Meninas" and entire traditions including the Northern European *vanitas* paintings that used decaying fruit as a reminder of mortality. Heffernan paints in an Old Masterish style: She mixes metaphors; she switches scales within a painting to create, in one case, a giant infant. A decade ago, she'd have been stuck in shows about appropriation. She seems more properly placed in this history-based exhibition. Hers are the most complex works in the show.

For centuries, artists have inserted self-portraits into their paintings, usually playing bit parts. Some contemporary artists prefer to make themselves stars, substituting their own faces for those in well-known paintings, creating visual jokes. Heffernan, though, seems to honor her artistic ancestors; she's thoughtful and respectful. Her work — and the whole tradition of artists' faces popping up in their paintings — inspires an unanswerable question: Is Bosch himself lurking somewhere in his chaotic masterpiece?

"Earthly Delights" is organized by Lisa Tung. Hours are Monday through Friday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m.; Saturday 11 a.m.-5 p.m. The gallery is closed on Sundays.