

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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Art review: 'Amanda Ross-Ho: Teeny Tiny Woman' translates well

The playful, ambitious exhibition at Museum of Contemporary Art's Pacific Design Center connects seemingly disparate works.

by Christopher Knight, Los Angeles Times Art Critic



An oversized enlarger used in photography dominates the center of the upstairs gallery in "Amanda Ross-Ho: Teeny Tiny Woman." (Brian Forrest, MOCA / June 26, 2012)

Amanda Ross-Ho makes art that engages in nonstop translation — ephemeral drawings morph into solid rooms, miniature sizes balloon into maximum magnitudes, magazine advertisements turn into gold-finished jewelry, childhood scribbles change into grown-up philosophical musings. She's the Babel fish of contemporary art.

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"Amanda Ross-Ho: Teeny Tiny Woman," her wry and seriously playful show at the Museum of Contemporary Art branch at the Pacific Design Center, is large in ambition and generous in rewards. Slow to reveal itself, the work gathers speed the longer one lingers. Organized by curator Rebecca Morse, it's among the best solo shows MOCA has commissioned for the PDC space.

Like Wonderland's Alice, Ross-Ho tumbles through the looking glass, eyes wide open, and she takes us along for the unexpected ride. Here the mirror is photography, which serves as the show's savvy central metaphor.

It's personal too, since both of the artist's parents were photographers. The center of the upstairs gallery is dominated by an enormous photographic enlarger, the kind Mom and Dad used in the 1960s, before the artist was born, to project film negatives for the production of positive prints.

At 37, Ross-Ho has found a fertile way to tap into her personal history and project it outward into bigger social shifts. Enlargers are mostly an outmoded, industrial-era method of image transformation; conceptually, hers is pressed into digital-age artistic service. It resonates amid the dizzying cultural alterations society is going through today.

For the show, Ross-Ho hired a Hollywood prop fabricator to make an enormous replica of the machine, which dominates the room. The enlarger has been enlarged. Vaguely ominous, as if the hardware might also be some sort of weapon, it's the kind of oversized item that turned up in Hitchcock movies, photographed in dramatic perspective by the diabolical director to set a scene of ominous foreboding.

Or, on the lighter side, think of props from a film like "The Incredible Shrinking Woman," the tale of a housewife exposed to an unhealthy mix of household chemicals that causes her to get smaller and smaller. In "Teeny Tiny Woman," that connection ricochets through your head while looking at a pair of actual ads torn from a magazine and pinned to a nearby sheet-rock panel leaning against the wall.

Each ad shows a homemaker wielding a spray bottle of cleanser, her image reflected in a bathroom mirror or a kitchen toaster as a domestic frame. In one, she's about to wipe up a toothpaste spill on the counter, in the other a splash of strawberry jam.

The two spills are rendered as cartoon faces that squeal in horror at their imminent demise at the hands of a teeny, tiny, doggedly conscientious woman. If the toothpaste face looks familiar, maybe it's because a small, kitschy little ceramic vessel with a similarly ghostlike appearance stands nearby on the floor. Meanwhile, across the panel from the jam-splash, a photograph of an ordinary bracelet charm

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shows a grinning — and startlingly similar — Halloween pumpkin head.

And so it goes throughout Ross-Ho's installation, as unrelated objects in different materials get hooked together in peculiar ways with disconnected images. Like an Alexis Smith collage, they seem to possess no immediately meaningful linkage, although one slowly emerges. A narrative is composed, but it's nonlinear and wholly imaginative — more like surfing the World Wide Web than reading a text. In a witty, unaffected way, it's as if she's demonstrating a submerged, unnoticed but universal connection among all things.

The big sheet-rock panels — 17 of them lean against the walls upstairs and downstairs — are construction materials, the kind used in building a room. One key to their function turns up just past the enlarger, where seven panels in stepped sizes lean against one another, small to large.

The small panel in front is the size of a plain piece of paper or an ordinary photograph. The big panel at the back is the same size as the other 16.

A wall text says that, when the dimensions of all 17 big panels are added together, they equal the dimensions of the artist's studio. Any gallery display is the residue of a workplace, but this one makes the fact literal. Suddenly one finds oneself rattling around inside the artist's head, not as an amorphous and immaterial zone of consciousness but as something visible and tangible.

It's filled with stuff, seemingly random like drifting thoughts, but really more like a Robert Rauschenberg "Combine" painting that sports a carefully chosen accumulation of disparate materials.

The panels are festooned with painted pictures of a rigid drafting triangle and a sensuous French curve, photographs of black and white wine glasses and the same glasses filled with the vivid colors of printers' inks, re-created and hugely enlarged abstract paintings from the artist's childhood, notepad-style written reminders, assorted jewelry (necklaces, earrings), a sweater and blouse big enough for a giant, bits of tape, satellite photographs of Earth seen from outer space that may or may not have been digitally manipulated, and more.

Ross-Ho's art builds a space that draws on personal memories and private places, which intertwine with worldly fragments that we inhabit and recognize. Those include the gallery room we occupy or the ads we've routinely encountered in the past while paging through a magazine. The deeper one travels into her gonzo mirror-world, the richer the eccentric connections become.

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Is that huge, screen-printed lace doily on one panel a humble metaphor of the ways in which labor entwines experiences? Or is it a witty excerpt from a family album — say, Grandma's decorative ancestral equivalent to the macramé wall-hanging of her parents' era, printed on a different panel? And, are both the doily and the macramé related to that photograph of a big ball of yarn or string on a panel across the room — a fuzzy sphere that visually rhymes with the adjacent grocery-store advertisement for coconuts?

How did we get from Grandma's parlor to the supermarket? What a lovely bunch of coconuts indeed.

Downstairs, in the center of the room beneath the enlarged enlarger above, Ross-Ho has built a scale model of the MOCA/PDC gallery you're standing in. But the rooms' component parts, such as stairways and doors, have been shuffled like a deck of cards. The sculpture recalls the architectural models of schools and homes from his youth made by the late Mike Kelley, adding another layer to Ross-Ho's unfolding enterprise.

Unlike a tight, intricate M.C. Escher drawing, where stairs and doors lead back in on themselves, leaving a viewer somehow back where he started, her loose-limbed maze is a collection of false starts, recognizable locations, dead ends and surprise openings. It takes you places you haven't been before, even though they look uncannily familiar.

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