

These creative, brightly-colored works have a dark message at CVA gallery

‘Sequesterings’ at the Center for Visual Art challenges beholders to consider materials’ effect on Earth

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"Sequesterings," the new exhibit at the Center for Visual Art, is more fun than it should be. After all, the artists in the show – who make their work out of the discarded plastics that are wreaking havoc on our environment – offer a candid look at how we are degrading the planet, one abandoned shopping bag, computer cable or crunched-up piece of bubble wrap at a time.

But the group show is full of colorful, creative and bewildering stuff, with the kind of visceral appeal that makes viewers pay attention. And it is easy to appreciate these objects as pure art-making – the act of taking a familiar material and transforming it into something more interesting than it was intended to be.

Take, for example, the work of Twyla Exner, who recycled old telephone wires for a piece titled "Thing 5." The material is reimagined as a series of gangly, tubular legs that dangle around a pedestal in the center of the CVA gallery on Santa Fe Drive. These soulless wires, coated in a pinkish plastic, are woven, by hand, into something organic and animal-like – resembling an octopus, or maybe a coral reef. By instilling a life force and a bit of personality into the material, the artist asks us to reconsider the many tons of electronic waste we throw into oceans and landfills each year.

Or the series of wall hangings, titled "Mylar Miasma," made by Natalya Khorover, who takes found, deflated balloons and sews them together into shape-shifting quilts that gleam under the gallery lights. Khorover's pieces have a natural optimism to them, but she does not let us forget that their source material is a by-product of our consumer excess – you can still read "Happy Birthday" and "Happy Valentine's Day" on the balloons, and she has kept their strings, which dangle from the bottom of the works.

It would be easy for these objects to fall into the realm of home-made crafts, the kind that kids make with dried macaroni and a glue gun sitting around the kitchen table, and there is something of a too-clever aesthetic that permeates the show. From a distance, these objects look like something Martha Stewart might have impressed her hobby-happy fans with on an episode of her old TV show.

But co-curators Cecily Cullen and Aurora Robson get us past that by spotlighting detailed workmanship, and that invites us to see these objects as serious endeavors.

One example of that is Robson's own pieces in the show, titled "Herbalist and Alchemist, I." It is a sprawling white wall sculpture made from thousands of plastic

pallet straps woven together into something like an oversized blanket. It is easy to imagine the labor, physical and mental, that went into creating this monumental work.

The curators also make a point, in their introduction to the show, that these objects are as much about activism as they are about art. The makers are "environmental stewards and aesthetic scavengers" at the same time.

"By investing time, care and artistry into unwanted materials, these artists offer a counter-narrative to mass-production and over-consumption," the statement reads.

There is also some magic in the way the show is installed. The CVA – a simple and expansive white-cube space with concrete floors and high ceilings – is probably the best room for art in the city. It's not overwhelmed with architectural tricks, like the Denver Art Museum or the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver. It would be tempting to cram it with more objects than it can hold, putting them in competition with each other.

But even with 10 artists on the roster, there is a breeziness to the whole effort. The work is amply spread out, and that lets each work speak for itself. Those accentuated blues, yellows and golds that single-use plastics are rendered in pop brilliantly against the colorless gallery walls.

It helps that the works here are showy enough to stand out on their own – like Ian Trask's "Molecule" series that transforms such materials as synthetic leather, dominoes, threaded steel rods and chopsticks into globular, three-dimensional blobs that resemble scientific models of combined atoms.

Or like Pamela "Posey" Moulton's shaggy rug-like wall pieces made from salvaged fishing gear. Moulton's bio says that she has reclaimed "20 tons of abandoned gear to date, transforming it into fantastical sculptures that blur the line between plant, animal, and imaginary creature."

There is other notable work in the exhibit, by Calder Kamin, Blue McRight, Anna Mein, Kelsey Merreck Wagner and Portia Munson, and each comes at the idea of harmful excess in its own, well-considered way.

But the curators here stay relentlessly on point in their choices and that brings it all together. They have done their own scavenging here, coming up with works that speak to each other as well as the larger audience of art fans that will go to see this show. It's thoughtful and entertaining, despite its very serious intent.

"Sequesterings" continues through Oct. 24 at the Center for Visual Art, 965 Santa Fe Drive. It's free. More info: 303-615-0282 or msudenver.edu/cva