

PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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Artweek

SARAH WAGNER AT 301 BOCANA GALLERY

Reviewed by Kristin Palm

July/August 2007

Taking a detour down a side street in my neighborhood one evening, I discovered something that made me stop and catch my breath. On a rare, vacant plot of land, wedged between cramped rows of Victorians, sprouted an unruly conglomeration of roses and herbs and lettuces and hibiscus and hollyhocks and chard and relatively any number of other wild-looking things. This community garden—a place where man-made systems and the entropy of the natural world intersect—has become my earthy, urban sanctuary. It's just steps from trendy shops and bustling taquerias, but it's altogether another world.

A similar feeling of tranquility and awe came over me upon viewing Sarah Wagner's *Roots Grow Both Ways*, 301 Bocanna Gallery is looted at an unassuming intersection in the quiet neighborhood of Bernal Heights, and Wagner's stunning textile sculpture installation—the centerpiece of the exhibition—was visible from outside through one of the gallery: two large street front windows. I imagine that happening serendipitously upon the installation—a dozen or so twisting, frayed and, yes, root-like forms of varying sizes, gorgeously fashioned from burlap and white silk organza and hanging from the ceiling—would have been especially pleasurable; approaching by appointment proved breathtaking as well.

The gallery was fairly cramped. On the one hand, I felt this setup did not do the exhibit justice (imagine contemplating Andy Goldsworthy or Kiki Smith in tight quarters), however artfully gallery owner Teresa O'Connor has appointed the space. The installation, especially, seemed best suited to a larger, windowless room where the viewer could feel truly enveloped by the sculptures, experiencing them more deeply in space and without the distraction of cars and passersby. On the other hand, though, utility seemed to be an important underlying theme of these works. Though her touch is subtle, Wagner made no attempt to disguise the block print on what appeared to be recycled burlap, for instance, or her spiraling sculptures' hefty, surged seams. And the arrangement at 301 Bocanna is nothing if not cleverly utilitarian. In that sense, the space (not to mention the magnificent interplay of natural light with the half-translucent sculptures) served the exhibit well.

In the next room was Wagner's *Splice* series—small swatches of sunflower roots delicately fused together so that, as with the sculptures, the tendrils reach both upward and down. Interestingly, Wagner included in the series her prototype, in which two straight pins enabling her first splice stood out against dark stems. Again, while she didn't foreground in the insertion of the artist's hand became an integral element of these pieces, a reminder of the interplay—and opposition—between natural and artificial forces. Later splices were glued, rather than pinned, obscuring human intervention, and the near seamlessness with which these objects joined to reach both ways raised all kinds of interesting ideas about what it means to take root. Here, everything that once dug deep into darkness and dirt also grabbed rather than sprouted or blossomed) upward into air and light. Interspersed with the *Splice* pieces were *Stream Investigations*. These grey and watery-green ink and watercolor pieces mimicked the branched sunflower roots, much as forms repeat throughout nature.

Although skillfully forged, Wagner's work felt primitive not in its construction but in the ambience created and the questions and sensations evoked. Her approach seems similar to that of a artist like Andy Goldsworthy with a meditative attention to texture and form. Yet to create sanctified spaces using synthetic materials seems a different (and, in my mind, more interesting) feat. However removed we may think we are from the natural world, these pieces reminded, we are always rooting into the earth. And it, too, is rooting into us.