

art and cake

Kaoru Mansour and Kira Vollman at ARK

Uncommon Denominators at ARK

ARK Gallery, Altadena

Written by Betty Brown | November 2, 2019

In math, the term “common denominator” refers to fractions that share the same bottom number (i.e., $1/5$, $2/5$, etc.) “Uncommon denominators” are fractions with different bottom numbers ($1/2$ and $1/3$, for example), numbers that must be altered in order to be added or subtracted. *Uncommon Denominators* is also a remarkable two-person exhibition at ARK Gallery in Altadena, featuring the work of Kaoru Mansour and Kira Vollman. The exhibition points to their diverse backgrounds (e.g., Mansour was born in Japan, Vollman in the US) and contrasting creative experiences (Mansour produces elegant collages with a nod to traditional Asian aesthetics while Vollman’s bold sculptures and paintings are situated in contemporary Postmodernism). The exhibition also highlights the way the two women influence and transform each other (metaphorically changing their “bottom numbers”) as they collaborate to produce both art and music.

I first saw Kira Vollman’s work at MOAH Cedar (Summer 2018). In the center of one of the MOAH rooms, she installed a wooden ladder-back chair erupting into the tree from which it had been hewn. The magical mutation echoed mythic metamorphoses, such as the Ancient Greek tale of Daphne turning into a laurel tree to avoid Apollo’s amorous assault. (The moment was exquisitely depicted by Gianlorenzo Bernini in a life-sized sculpture completed between 1622 and 1625.) Vollman’s tree-chair image is echoed in her large “Reception” painting (2016-17), one of the first works viewers encounter upon entering ARK.

In the two back rooms of ARK hang Vollman’s “Breathe #3” and “Breathe #4”, two mixed media pieces that scatter casts of human mouths across the horizontal field like melodic notes on the staff lines of musical notation. As viewers walk in front of the sculpted reliefs, their bodies set off motion sensors that activate recordings of the

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artist's voice. Vollman is a true synesthetic: she has sense impressions in one part of the body that are stimulated by other parts. As she puts it, "I have time-space synesthesia. This causes me to experience time as a spatial construct." (Musician Duke Ellington, actor Geoffrey Rush, and poet Arthur Rimbaud are three famous people who are also synesthetics.) In both of Vollman's "Breathe" pieces, sound and motion (two time-based phenomena) are embodied in the adamant physicality of her sculptural spaces.

One of Kaoru Mansour's largest works in *Uncommon Denominator* is "Woman and Hanging Rose" (2019), which elegantly combines painted roses suspended from fragile strings with a collaged photograph of the artist's mother as a young woman. At the top of the composition is a cluster of colored circles, simultaneously recalling globes, beads, seeds, and dangling paper lanterns. Mansour's composition effectively contrasts representational elements with sophisticated abstract passages. The same evocative combination is seen in her "Trumpet Flower", "Chandelier" and "Nap" (2015-19), "Pink Rose and Chandelier #101" (2017), and "Night Walk" (2015), which juxtapose botanical and manufactured objects. The "Trumpet Flower" composition is divided diagonally, with the flowers hanging from the upper left, and the artist's signature beads/balls/seeds clustered on curved stems. A ghostly, abstracted chandelier and a pale peach textile fill the lower right corner. "Night Walk" balances another spectral chandelier with a suspended crystal bowl filled with ground salt. Both images hover over a darkened photograph of an eerie black forest. Mansour's work has a poetic resonance that is both nostalgic and expressive.

Both of the *Uncommon Denominator* artists work in three-dimensions as well as two-dimensions. Mansour's circles appear as fabric, paper, wood, and dried gourd in her assemblage works. In "Next Voice #106", the globes tumble across a small rectangle like bubbles escaping into the air. Vollman's ladder-back chair reappears in "Rest" (2017-18), a mixed media assemblage involving concrete, tar, ink, a doll's chair, and knitted steel mesh.

Vollman and Mansour explore myriad materials, techniques and subjects, always achieving lyrical, one might even say melodic, configurations. The two artists might have uncommon denominators, but the rhythmic grace of their artworks allows them to weave visual tapestries of harmony, beauty, and balance.