

Dirt takes center stage at DePaul Art Museum



From photographer Jane Fulton Alt's series "The Burn." (Courtesy of the artist)

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The forested peaks and crumbly cliffs of the landscape have long been recognized as an appropriate theme for art. So have death and dying. The matter out of which that landscape grows, the substance into which the dead are returned — not so much. That stuff is soil, and it is the unexpected subject of a wise and timely group show at the DePaul Art Museum.

"Rooted in Soil" is the co-production of a mother-daughter curatorial team, Laura Fatemi, director of the museum, and Farrah Fatemi, an assistant professor of environmental studies. It features work by a disarmingly vast range of 15 artists, including a Flemish vanitas painter who died in 1652 and the eminent photographers Sally Mann and Vik Muniz, plus Chicago Wildsounds, a student group that makes field recordings of the city's natural soundscape. Materials range from fungus and thinly sliced beets to vintage busts, ferns and real-time 3-D graphics.

And yes, it is about dirt.

The grime you wipe off your shoes when you come home from playing outside, the muck you scrape out of your fingernails after you've been gardening, the ground in which your vegetables and cut flowers grow, the earth into which you will decompose after you die — that's dirt. We city folk tend not to think about it too much, since we tend

not to see it very often, except in our scarce backyards (when they're not occupied by car garages or paved over for convenience) or occasional parks.

Enter the DePaul Museum and you will not just see soil but smell it, feel it and hear it. In the lobby, Vaughn Bell's verdant terrarium stands on stilts, with holes so a visitor can stick her head up to ground level, achieving a humble perspective that might best be described as a bug's-eye view. It affords a cross section of the earth and a wondrous hushing of the Red Line train tracks visible on the other side of the glass. In the front gallery lies a platform on which Linda Swanson is forming rich, pinkish clay by dripping water from a breastlike canopy onto a bed of volcanic ash. The gentle, wet patter creates a constantly evolving surface that's at once a wilderness of crevices and pools, a delicate body of cracked skin and a monochromatic abstract bas-relief. A room at the back contains Claire Pentecost's handsome soil apothecary, packed with shelves holding hundreds of vials of earth, samples of which can be sniffed from a display of bell jars. A chalkboard helpfully diagrams that one is meant to stick their nose in the jar, not the soil directly, and notes dates when visitors can bring their own specimens for examination. I scented dirt from Kilbourn Park, the Bowmanville community garden, the University of Illinois at Chicago facilities compost and a Monsanto Roundup Ready cornfield in Three Oaks Township, Mich.. My nose isn't as keen as my eyes — I'm an art critic, not a perfumer — but even I found the Monsanto cornfield's lack of odor alarming.

The loamy dew of these organic artworks swamps the air and renders the experience of "Rooted in Soil" visceral. You might think you'd accidentally ended up at the Lincoln Park Conservatory rather than an art museum. In the dead of winter, the solace of this effect cannot be understated. It must be a nightmare for the registrar.

The exhibition also includes representational work and designed objects, the best of which confront death and decay with a lack of sentimentality and a surfeit of bravery. Jane Fulton Alt documents controlled prairie fires in northern Illinois up close. In one of my favorite videos of the last decade, British artist Sam Taylor-Johnson uses time-lapse film to capture the disintegration of a bowl of fruit from a luscious assortment to a dense, black buzzing mass, revealing in unabashed detail what historical still lifes only implied in their arrangements of skulls, wilting bouquets and timepieces. A burial suit conceived by Jae Rhim Lee clothes the body in fabric containing spores and nutrients for fungi, replacing the wasteful comfort of a coffin with the honest ecology of a shroud that hastens the inevitable while also detoxifying our polluted bodies. Sally Mann goes further, pointing her dreamy, unflinching lens at human bodies left to decompose on the forest floor of a forensic science facility at the University of Tennessee.

The very fact that death and decay play such a major role in a show about soil commends the curators, as well. As the *Fatemis* write in the catalog, these are "natural soil processes."

As with any environmentally oriented show these days, activism and politics must have their place. Jenny Kendler rallies with whimsy, reimagining lichen as high art and devising cast neon mushrooms that can be installed in damaged forests for bioremediation. The strange delicacy, if not the message, of Kendler's sculptures is shared by Julia Goodman's series of beet papyrus, sheets of rainbow roots slivered, layered and dried into something as earthy as it is ethereal.

Other artists present the destructive impact of industrial agriculture and pollution. But "Rooted in Soil" isn't a call to arms, not exactly. It is a call to something, to some kind of return to a place we've been before, a place where we knew and felt and understood our deep-rooted connection to the soil that sustains us in life and sustains us even more in death. The earth on which we live is called The Earth, after all. It isn't called The Pavement.

"Rooted in Soil" runs through April 26 at the DePaul Art Museum, 935 West Fullerton Avenue, 773-325-7506, museums.depaul.edu.

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/ct-ent-0305-rooted-in-soil-review-20150304-story.html>