

The Boston Globe

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2009

ARTS & PERFORMANCE

Dancing around the ephemeral

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Darren Foote and Sheila Gallagher make a discordant pair in "Astra Castra" at Judi Rotenberg Gallery. The two share a

GALLERIES

theme; the show's title comes from an Emily Dickinson poem that treads the realm between now and eternity, between what we know and what we can't possibly comprehend. Both artists are strong. Gallagher, who works in several media, was a contender for the Institute of Contemporary Art's Foster Prize in 2007. An up-and-coming sculptor, Foote continues to surprise — and only occasionally disappoint — with his use of wood's materiality to explore the ephemeral. Their work would fit smoothly into a larger exhibit on this topic, but in a two-person show, some formal kinship is called for. Without that, they're like two dancers who can't find the rhythm.

Individually, though, there are many delights. Gallagher's marvelous "Daily Calendar Mandala," made from tiny copies of tear-offs from her planner, transmutes a nattering record of chores into an object of meditation. So does her comical, beautiful video "SOS." The video depicts billowing purple smoke; the audio features a Buddhist sutra chant, which slowly becomes threaded with rhythmically intoned to-do lists: "E-mail Tim, e-mail Sue. . . . Get prescription for Wellbutrin."

Gallagher "paints" with smoke. With her breathy, iridescent images of creatures that have survived for millennia and will no doubt outlast us, a horseshoe crab and a sea urchin, the artist depicts the stubbornly tenacious with a material that evokes transcendence.



COURTESY JUDI ROTENBERG GALLERY (ABOVE)

Above: "Sea Urchin" by Sheila Gallagher is on display at Judi Rotenberg Gallery.

Foote appeared on the scene at Rhys Gallery last spring with objects crafted from wood, such as flashlights and lamps, shooting wooden beams. We associate rays of light with spirituality and awakening; Foote's crashed down toward surfaces in a frightening manner.

In that show, the wooden light touched down on tabletops without destroying them. Here, in "Entry Table," the beams buckle the table. In making his light even more like matter, Foote pushes the concept too far. It worked better when the rays looked threatening, but still behaved like light.

But then Foote leaves the beams behind and lets his sculptures appear to dissolve or crumple in the light of day. In "Two Chairs," in which the air seems to have eaten into the space between the two, the artist recovers his balance, toying with our sense of what's solid and what's palpable about what is not.

DARREN FOOTE AND SHEILA GALLAGHER:
Astra Castra

At: Judi Rotenberg Gallery, 130 Newbury St., through March 1. 617-437-1518, www.judirotenberg.com