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## Visual Arts : Invented Worlds : A decade of experimentation at SPACELab

By Lyz Bly

SPACES, an artist-run gallery on the near West Side, has been around for more than 25 years. Since 1978 it has survived Cleveland's tumultuous economy and fickle art scene; it even weathered the cultural wars of the early 1990s when conservatives fought viciously to end public funding for "controversial" artwork.

**BACK FROM SPACELAB: 10 YEARS OF INNOVATION**  
 Through October 15  
 SPACES  
 2220 Superior Viaduct  
 216.621.2314

While the



**Blue period**  
 Angela White, *A blue quiet interest.*

gallery continues to be a cultural force, both regionally and nationally, it has in recent years often presented exhibitions that are overly formulaic and categorically lackluster. However, some of the most visually and conceptually compelling projects have come out of SPACELab, a program that gives emerging and established artists a venue for experimental endeavors. Two SPACELabs are mounted sequentially during the run of SPACES' main exhibitions; there have been 109 SPACELabs since 1994.

The current exhibition, *Back from SPACELab 10 Years of Innovation*, not only captures some of SPACELab's most creative and innovative moments, it also displays the most interesting and challenging installations and works of art exhibited at SPACES in the last decade.

The exhibit includes pieces from ten of the 109 participating artists. A well-designed brochure includes photographs of and statements about the artists' previous and current SPACELab projects. It is fascinating to note the changes in their creative trajectories. In 2002, Diana Al-Hadid created a paper plate cave — *Plated Cave* — that, despite the common material, was elegant in a sterile, sci-fi manner. *Plated Cave* demonstrated an excellent use of the space, transforming part of the gallery into an overwhelmingly ethereal experience.

Al-Hadid takes a "less is more" approach in her current installation. She visually transforms highly synthetic materials (green astroturf, two-part foam, and iridescent white paint), breathing life into them, making them seem organic. The astroturf forms climb — and descend — from the gallery walls, rising like suburban lawn waves, and then cascading gracefully on to the floor. Al-Hadid made perfect use of the space, commandeering the physical elements of her gallery nook, making them as important to the atmosphere as the brazenly artificial materials she used to create her gravity-defying, Seussian structures.

Andrea Loeffke also has a penchant for producing environments that evoke an otherworldly, artificially enchanting realm. Regarding her 2003 SPACELab piece, *Beneath such dreamy weather*, Loeffke states, "I hope that my invented worlds surprise and make the viewer wonder." Her current piece, *Bathing, blooming and waddling in the rain*, does just that. Loeffke brilliantly uses the gallery space, incorporating one of SPACES' beautifully raw columns into her installation, as glittery green fabric foliage appears to climb it. The contrast of the natural wood with the

Arts & Pop Culture



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intense green forms draws one's gaze up to the ceiling, where a cartoony teal cloud unleashes a shower of taut blue string. Below, an oversized yellow rubber duck rests atop a two-dimensional pool of water. The scene is at once charming and disconcerting, as if it were ripped out of a children's book or cartoon and then displaced in the gallery. And the slick shapes and Loeffke's meticulous employment of ultra-mod artificial materials makes for a strangely sensual experience. The pod-like, rubbery flowers that sprout from the wooden floor are incongruously seductive, making them difficult to resist touching.

Dennis Dukeman contributed *ALL THE THINGS YOU LEAVE BEHIND*, a disappointingly grandiose installation based on his current obsession, off-road cycling. Dukeman successfully evokes the experience of riding through a thick wooded area, as one feels a bit nauseated watching the piece's film component, which was shot from the rider's vantage point. However, the inclusion of a bridge-like ramp and the scattering of large rocks across the gallery floor makes the piece seem a bit contrived. The artist raises a muddied mountain bike to an iconic level in a slick, strongly lit photograph. The elements fail to clearly mesh, which illustrates Dukeman's statement in the brochure: "A bicycle is an instrument used in a creative process that is only completely realized by its beholder (the rider)."

This methodological quagmire makes one wonder why the artist decided to explore the theme at all. But examining creative and conceptual quandaries is what SPACELab is all about. It is what SPACES — sans "Lab" — should be doing more of in its regular exhibitions.

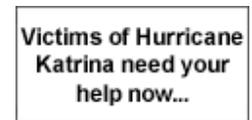
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