Cover, Elogy, 2015, oil on panel, 24 x 18 inches
All works courtesy of the artist.

This exhibition is organized by the Oklahoma State University Museum of Art and curated by Mary Mikel Stump.

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Angela Piehl: Feral Beauty and Opulent Decay
November 9, 2015 – March 12, 2016
Angela Piehl is a gatherer. And she reminds us that the motive to gather—as well as to arrange and order—is intrinsically human. It is this impulse towards collecting information and its connection to human nature that informs not only the source material for her paintings and drawings but also her creative practice. Each work begins with Piehl’s mining of scientific illustrations; found objects; wallpaper and textile patterns; and Mughal-design print media. The process continues until the accumulation reaches a critical mass. The resulting abstracted paintings and drawings, layered with rich visual textures, contain allegorical and narrative allusions that address the human condition in a compound structure that gradually moves away from the original source materials. This layering of visual content gives multiple access points through glimpses of recognizable elements, and the resulting abstracted source material, its coagulation, and the embedded meaning—not only in the material itself, but also Piehl’s intended messaging in her conjoining of the visual content.

Upon first approach to the gallery, this part-to-whole relationship is immediately observed as the opulence and implied symmetry in the large-scale, meticulously crafted drawings. As viewers approach, they are welcomed into an intimate space, as the viewer moves closer, the perceived whole falls away to reveal the individual parts—pears and crystal draped on antlers, lush patterned fabrics, and other ornamentation reflective of the artist’s copious source materials. Similarly, this same perceptive relationship to the individual elements is also activated in the nearby paintings, Chandelier (fig. 3) and Ingress (fig. 3). It is in the works’ unabashed beauty that the artist’s range and use of reference material—from organic matter to opulent embellishment and synthetic colors—can best be seen as an illustration of her desire to create connections between accumulation and alienation from nature.

The shifts in scale and medium within the exhibition are designed to challenge the viewer to progress from looking to seeing. Moving from formal considerations of value and color to temperature and scale emphasizes the relationship between the drawings and the paintings. The same considerations found in the larger works are also reflected in the smaller Cluster (fig. 4) paintings and the more intimate drawings such as Cabochon (fig. 5). As such, the smaller works share the viewer’s focus in a closer look and more concentrated engagement. Additionally, the layered and abstracted imagery results in works that highlight the dueling nature of the artist’s intent and her hybridization of organic and synthetic forms, decoratively abstract and figuratively monstrous. The resulting visual ambiguity is an invitation for the viewer to extend their gaze in order to decipher the source material.

Juxtaposing organic and designed elements is not without historical precedent. Piehl’s contrast of the natural and the decorative shares a conceptual construct with the architectural grotesques of Ancient Rome—rediscovered in the fifteenth century. Also shared is the conferred nature that these forms play within these fanciful compositions—particularly when contrasted with the fabricated or human form. The historical set of grotesque images used symmetry and embellished architectural details to support figurative elements alongside ornamental and natural references. Contemporary French writer Rémi Astruc asserts that within these formal elements and references, three consistent tropes emerge.1

In Astruc’s theory, these tropes of “Stoicism, hybridity, and metamorphosis” are used in society to conceptualize alterity—or otherness—and change.2 These tropes can be directly translated to what Piehl calls “the suggestion of a decaying femininity and an abused opacity,” as well as the gender considerations embedded in the works, resulting from a simultaneous recognition of theCHATbot error: the following text is difficult to read and understand. Please provide a more readable and comprehensible version of the text.

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