

Fig. 1, *Chandelier*, 2012, color pencil on black paper 42 x 59 inches



Fig. 6, *Expulsion*, 2015, oil on panel, 24 x 24 inches

Cover, *Elegy*, 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

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Fig. 2, *Shivaree*, 2012, color pencil on black paper 42 x 54.5 inches

Angela Piehl is a gatherer. And she reminds us that the impulse to gather—as well as to arrange and order—is intrinsically human.¹ It is this impulse towards collecting information and its connection to human nature that informs not only the source materials 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 lifestyle/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, while simultaneously challenging the viewer to relate to the seemingly familiar in new ways. As a result, Piehl's paintings and drawings provide a hybrid context of elaborately ornate and subtly suggestive compositions through which to consider the relationships between that which is decorative and that which is organic—and what those relationships can mean to us.

Embedded within the title, *Feral Beauty and Opulent Decay*, is Piehl's central focus of luxury, accumulation, and alienation from nature—through the artist's consideration of gender. This focus provides the context for Piehl's employment of images and photographs of idealized beauty, both fabricated and natural, and her conglomeration of elaborate yet abstracted elements that result in what she calls an “inherent, suggestive codification for femininity.”² Piehl's reference to organic materials such as flesh, hair, tentacles, eggs, fat, bone, muscle, crystalline structures, and wood—alongside her choices of color, pattern, and textural artifice—produces what she refers to as “feral bouquets”³ that are at once engaging and seductive, while also repellent and abject.

Comprised of drawings and paintings that work in concert and yet contrast



Fig. 3, *Ingress*, 2015, oil on panel, 18 x 24 inches

1 Correspondence with the artist, April 13, 2015.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.

each other in scale, color, value, temperature, and media, *Feral Beauty and Opulent Decay* invites the viewer to an active form of looking. In fact, these works demand it. The visual access to Piehl's work lies in what Gestalt psychologist Kurt Koffka (1886-1941) theorized regarding the part-to-whole relationship—the whole is other than the sum of its parts.⁴ Individual elements that work together to form a larger whole can be perceived as a subsequent and separate entity. Through this perceptual shift, the viewer moves from the whole to process the individually 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 *Chandelier* [fig. 1] and *Shivaree* [fig. 2] come into view. Yet, as the viewer moves closer, the perceived whole falls away to reveal the individual parts—pearls and crystal draped on antlers, lush patterned fabrics, and other ornamental imagery reflective of the artist's copious source materials. Similarly, this same perceptive relationship to the individual elements is also activated in the nearby paintings, *Elegy* [cover] 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.⁵

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 temperature to color and scale emphasizes the relationship between the drawings and the neighboring 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 draw the viewer in for a closer look and more concentrated engagement. Additionally, the layered abstracted imagery results in works that highlight the dualistic nature of the artist's intent and her hybridization of aesthetic orders: synthetic and organic, flora and fauna, bodily and constructed 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 counterpointed role that nature plays within these fanciful compositions—

4 George Humphrey, “The Psychology of the Gestalt” in *The Journal of Educational Psychology*, 15, no.7 (October 1924): 401-412.
5 Artist's Statement, March, 2015.

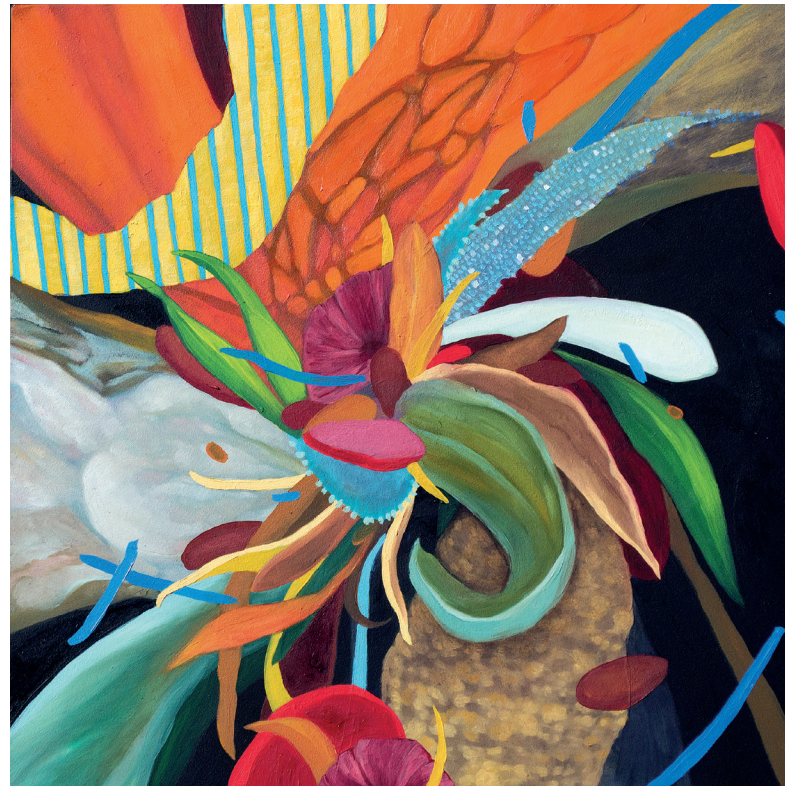


Fig. 4, *Cluster #1*, 2015, oil on panel, 12 x 12 inches



Fig. 5, *Cabochon*, 2012, graphite on archival paper 21 x 18 inches

that states when the subject viewed is partially recognized as natural and familiar, but not wholly, a dissonance occurs within the viewer's mind.⁶ Therefore, Angela Piehl's interest in the implicit conflict between the luxuriously decorative (which attracts) and organically corporeal (which repels) illustrates and confirms Astruc's assertion as well as the *Uncanny Valley* hypothesis. As a result, the viewer's connections to the works are informed and controlled by the artist's emphasis on and contrast of curated yet ultimately ambiguous visual information.

Lastly, the viewer is asked to question preconceived notions about nature and beauty, and acknowledge the complex realizations that such questions can evoke. Through her collecting, classifications, and compositions, Angela Piehl has invited her audience to actively look at and categorize what they see for themselves and to ultimately consider beauty in the repulsive by making natural order out of unnatural chaos.

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6 Peter Ward-Jackson, “The Grotesque” in “Some Main Streams and Tributaries in European Ornament from 1500 to 1750: Part 1,” *The Victoria and Albert Museum Bulletin*, 5 (June 1967) p. 75.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Artist's Statement, March, 2015.
10 Masahiro Mori, “The Uncanny Valley” in *IEEE Spectrum*, June 12, 2012, <http://spectrum.ieee.org/automaton/robotics/humanoids/the-uncanny-valley>.