

Maura Bendett

Post, Los Angeles

January 9 - February 6, 1999

Minus 456 degrees Fahrenheit refers to the temperature at which molecules cease to move. The coldest place in the world, Vostok near the South Pole, attained at its very coldest a biting minus 129 degrees. Far from the center, at the outer fringe of the solar system, scientists speculate that temperatures typically hover around minus 446 degrees. By titling her show “-456° Fahrenheit,” Maura Bendett directs us to a distant, imaginary site of intractable timelessness.

What do we see when we get there? Objects that might have caused the head of Owen Jones, nineteenth-century advocate of decorative arts, to snap back in dismay. Author of *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), Jones believed in just-so harmony, gradual undulations, and a proper balance of the straight, the inclined, and the curved. Color should present what he called a “neutralized bloom.” He warned against “excrecences” that push ornamentation toward excess. To this day, most of us strive, to greater or lesser degrees of success, to follow Jones’s lead. Open one of those preternaturally tasteful Martha Stewart catalogues, with its beguilingly pastel, Connecticut order (or, for that matter, look at the work of any Minimalist), and you will see what I mean.

Maura Bendett is clearly unafraid of the decorative. In recent work, she employed acetate painted with tinted glue, glass, and beeswax to create delicate tondos of fanciful flowers that recall both stained glass and touching, pre-adolescent attempts to personalize a bedroom. Her current constructions retain a visual delicacy, but wear their ornamentation with the exuberance of a gaudy aunt at a family wedding.

Still conceived from nature, yet spinning out away from it, Bendett’s pieces possess the loose restraint and asymmetry of Rococo grotesqueries. Her wildly colored, wonky arabesques ooze resin and drip with juicy, glittering orbs. Yellow tendrils of steel and plaster curl at ends that reach out to nothing in particular. Bobbing in the breeze, sprays of goo-goo eyes radiate like coronets. In *Aurora di Venezia* (1998-99), a comically pink cluster of plastic media erupts at chest level, reminiscent of



MAURA BENDETT, *AURORA DI VENEZIA* (DETAIL), 1998-99, 104 x 38 x 20 IN.

the fecund breasts of Diana of Ephesus.

Rococo ornamentation, “decadent” and “irrational,” was emphatically suppressed by Neoclassicists. Its opponents preferred the notion of an orderly cosmos to the possibility of “unnatural” chaos: Greek reason to Roman hedonism; realism to fervid imagination (yes, we know these dichotomies never exist so cleanly). In its strange playfulness, as well as its willingness to jumble the order of things, Rococo ornament questioned hierarchy itself. Bendett’s new works are equally, cheerfully, unruly. They do not go where you would expect them, nor behave as might be predicted. These days, this could be perceived as more of the same. However, Bendett’s oddly pretty drogeries lack the serious agenda, coy academic calculation, or hysteria-whipped, cynical ennui that seem increasingly requisite. And to my eyes, they are pleasing.

Kristina Newhouse