



MARK BORGHI FINE ART

Opinion

## The Beauty of Ignoble Crumbs

By Janet Goleas

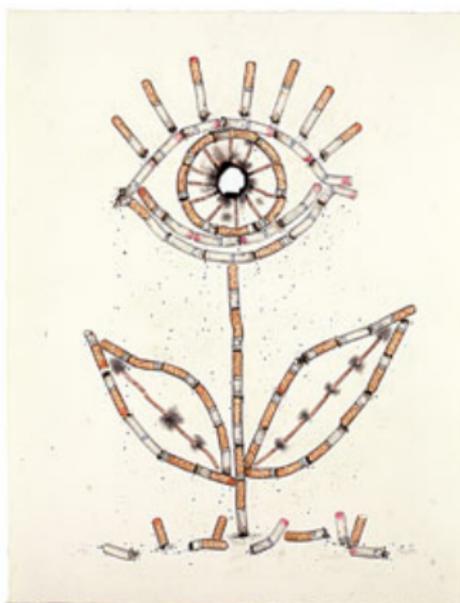
(September 2, 2010) “Summer Bummer,” an exhibit on view at the Fireplace Project in Springs of multimedia drawings by Aurel Schmidt, a Canadian artist, reconstitutes bits of urban debris and scraps of modern life and transforms them into exquisite, fantastical renderings. This self-taught natural talent has developed a body of work that is part tongue in cheek and part blatantly hair raising.

The works included are beautiful depictions of some of the world’s least beautiful objects — cigarettes and burnt matches, horseflies and beer cans, wilting flowers and specs of dirt scattered about like so much confetti. And yet, in the hands of this gifted artist, these ignoble crumbs of life have been morphed into delicate memento mori. They are as blistering as they are seductive.

Born in Kamloops, British Columbia, a sprawling pulp mill city, as soon as the young artist graduated from high school she hightailed it out of town. She moved to Vancouver, and there she taught herself art history and philosophy and began to make gigantic, hyperrealistic pencil drawings. When she met the then-burgeoning curator, publisher, and photographer Tim Barber, he encouraged her to cultivate what was clearly an exceptional talent for realism, which was not exactly the artistic wave of the moment. She moved to New York in 2005, and toughed out a living with various odd jobs while she continued to develop her drawings.

For Ms. Schmidt, who seems to thrive on a certain level of conflict, her move to New York’s Chinatown provided just the right mixture of squalor, decay, debris, and street life. She retooled, and began scavenging the most arrant fragments of urban debris: dead insects and birds, crushed condoms, random Band-Aids, ticket stubs. You get the idea.

Of her oeuvre, which has grown to a broad range of obsessively detailed, often surrealistic renderings, the selections here are modest, but they provide a window into the psyche of this timely artist. In the work “Evil Eye,” 2010, Ms. Schmidt arranged a collection of cigarette butts into the shape of a bursting, childlike flower, the blossom of which is configured into a huge, wide-open eye. Its lens, portrayed by a cigarette burn that has seared a hole right through the paper, seems to be a



Aurel Schmidt incorporates found detritus into her surrealistic renderings such as “Evil Eye,” in which she has arranged a collection of cigarette butts into the shape of a flower.

metaphor linking vision to a kind of cultural Armageddon. The works here fuse detritus with prettiness, commingling burn holes and butterflies, orchids and discarded soda cans, smokes and snakes.

Something of an enfant terrible, Ms. Schmidt's star has risen quickly in the art world. A leggy blonde who is never seen without her trademark Poindexter eyeglasses, she has been included in more than one media spread in Paper Magazine's "Beautiful People of 2009" and the like.

Since her 2006 blast-off at New York's Spenser Brownstone Gallery in the exhibit "tinyvices," curated by Mr. Barber, the artist, who was then just 25, has ascended at an astonishing pace. She was included in the 2010 Whitney Biennial and has exhibited works across Europe and on both U.S. coasts. Profiles have appeared on her in The New York Times, The Daily Beast, and Purple Magazine, and in 2008 the gallery Deitch Projects published a stunning monograph on her titled "Maneater."

Taken together, her works are conversant with the kind of Surrealist non sequiturs that juxtapose imagery and idioms. But Ms. Schmidt's methodology is more Victorian than it is 20th century. Of course, it's not difficult to trace aspects of Surrealism back to Victorian collage — it appealed to Max Ernst, after all.

But back in the day, in the 19th century, it was mostly irascible upper-class ladies who snipped and glued pictures from carte de visite, quietly reconfiguring the elements to expose the brooding underbelly of polite society. This way they could point a gloved finger at the truth of the times, which, as proper homemakers and wives, they could not do under other circumstances. Indeed, the Victorian era was poised at the cusp of a cultural transformation that included the dawn of photography, the Industrial Revolution, technological and scientific advancements, crushing poverty, child labor, pollution, and overpopulation. Sound familiar?

In a similar way, Ms. Schmidt exposes aspects of our cultural landscape that are based not on romantic notions of the natural world, but on the world as it actually has become. The cluttered city, the noise and decay and varying levels of anxiety and paranoia, the diminishing landscape — these are the concepts that have come to define her work. And yet, there is a sentimentality to her renderings that is funny but not ironic, seductive and yet hideously depraved, like a Boschian nightmare.

Ms. Schmidt assembles her subject matter in all manner of convolutions, but one thing always remains the same: She addresses them with the meticulous hand of a virtuoso. Like a homeless wunderkind, the multimedia artist turns the stuff of inner-city decay into drawings that achieve a level of precision and sensitivity that is somewhat uncommon in today's art world. In this way, she shares a sense of obsessive whimsy with the likes of the Renaissance Mannerist Giuseppe Arcimboldo, whose fanciful portraits were complex, almost hallucinatory assemblages of fruits and vegetables, fish and crustaceans. Ms. Schmidt's skillful eye revisualizes the ordinary — indeed, the bleakest of remnants — into magical and fanciful compositions.

The show can be seen through Labor Day.