

Freeze frames // Petrides' paintings take viewers out to sea
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'Olivia Petrides: Cycles and Confrontations' and Vera Scekic Through Aug. 1 Artemesia Gallery,
700 N. Carpenter

(312) 226-7323 'Marcie Gill-Kinast: Minutiae' Through Aug. 1 A.R.C. Gallery, 1040 W. Huron
(312) 733-2787 Olivia Petrides' paintings of icebergs in the North Atlantic are refreshingly scientific in their literalness. Small and a little unpolished, they look like notebook entries from a geological expedition.

Petrides has in fact traveled extensively in the North Atlantic and in her travels has produced paintings of Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands, some of which are now on view at Artemesia Gallery. And although she is neither a realist painter nor a scientist, Petrides still manages to create works that at least appear to document specific climatic conditions and ice formations as if they are the observations of a naturalist.

In a witty reversal of scale, the iceberg paintings are all 5 by 15 inches. Each one is a study of looming masses of floating ice, and they all look as though they were created on the deck of a ship pitching through icy waters.

This old-fashioned, you-are-there quality makes for exciting paintings. Small as they are, they conjure surprisingly deep emotions of excitement and desolation in the presence of these grand and terrifying natural forms.

In most of these strangely intense paintings, the water and sky are a menacing black blue, a color suggesting bone-deep cold and unseen danger. The ice itself is full of color, an emotional spectrum of purple, blue and sickly gray.

Even in Petrides' daylight views, the water is clearly an alien environment in which ice looms as monster, as god, as protagonist. There is no human presence in these paintings, and none is needed. Rather they speak of a natural world so big, so impersonally de-----structive, so beautiful and grand that human life has no significant place there.

Also at Artemesia is a tight little show of graphite drawings by Vera Scekic. Scekic's work, while it also refers to the natural world, is as clean and smooth as Petrides' paintings are crude and bumpy. Basically abstract compositions based on natural substances, these drawings are rendered so smoothly and with such refinement they appear to be photographs at first. But photos of what?

One drawing, "Multi-Particle Event," shows arcs and lines against a blue ground. It could be a star map or the elegant remainders of an algebraic equation worked out on a blackboard with no erasures.

Another, "Bitewing," shows the delicate image of teeth, dimly visible as they appear on a dental X-ray. These are elegant drawings, finely rendered yet without the grandiosity that sometimes accompanies virtuosity. They seem to refer to galaxies and at the same time to microscopic views of lifeforms and are presented with the -----cool impartiality of medical illustration.

Downstairs at A.R.C. Gallery is a collection of mini-collages by Marcie Gill-Kinast. With none measuring more than 4 inches in any direction, these little fabrications are built inside box tops and look like what Joseph Cornell might have produced if he'd been a mad child with nothing to work with but his own broken toys.

Gill-Kinast works with tiny parts, mostly plastic toys of the kind that shoot out of bubble gum machines or show up as favors in Cracker Jack boxes. This is not a new idea, combining bric-a-brac and junk in bright, pleasing ways to comment on the obsessive superficiality of our throwaway culture. Plastic doll heads, mini-trolls, costume jewelry, dime store trinkets, beads and marbles, it's the same stuff we've seen a lot of in galleries over the past decade or so. What is eye-catching about this artist's work, though, is the cumulative effect of hundreds of these little junkocosms massed

together and hung in neat rows on two walls.

They suck you in, begin to create a hypnotic effect that only one or two or a dozen or even a hundred would not have. This format of miniature toys in brown boxes begins to look like a norm, forcing the viewer to inspect each piece more closely to differentiate it from the others. The viewer starts to see how quickly each box becomes its own absorbing world and how odd that world is. In one, a Barbie doll head is blindfolded, bound and gagged with colored rubber bands and surrounded by tiny black beads that look like caviar or gunshot.

In the midst of all this glitter and pink plastic, it is a provocative and satisfyingly creepy thing, and here is where the language of these little plastic gewgaws begins to make sense.

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