

# Susan Beiner's Synthetic Reality

Biotechnology, Nature and Creativity

*Article by Glen R. Brown*



*Synthetic Reality. 2008. Porcelain, glaze, foam, Polyfill and Plexiglas.*

THE VIBRANT CORAL ACCRETIONS, PORIFERANS AND pulpy anemones of a tropical reef or the mossy, flower-spangled turf of an alpine meadow uprooted in sections from its tranquil bed and draped in vertical display like some ponderous plush tapestry: on first appearance, the wall-mounted component of *Synthetic Reality* – ceramic artist Susan Beiner's recent foray into the installation

format – breathes, heaves and palpitates like living tissue resected from the writhing body of nature. But, as its title concisely indicates, *Synthetic Reality* draws inspiration from more than the varied organicity of the natural realm. Amid its vaguely floral forms and the surging sea of leaves, fronds and swelling pods, certain hardware oddities abound that were never spawned by nature. Hybridity of biomorphic and





*Synthetic Reality (Detail of Stems). Porcelain, glaze, foam, Polyfill and Plexiglas. Variable dimensions.*

mechanical – of the brimming, teeming lines of life and the hard planes, crisp angularity and implicit utility of humanly conceived form – distances *Synthetic Reality* from the soft illumination of field and forest and mounts it squarely under the cold white light of the laboratory or the artificial sun of an experimental greenhouse. Nature meets science and yields itself up not only to the rigorous intensity of the latter's scrutiny but also to the rational equivalent of the libidinal drives: a passionate genetic manipulation that works nature over in unmistakable reflection of human desire.

For the contemporary mind – now largely disabused of any naively idealistic notions of science as an infallible ally in the war on human suffering and technology as the magnanimous steel-and-silicon angel of progress spinning from the gleaming gears of its industrial brain a world perfectly consonant with human needs and ambitions – all intrusions of science and technology in nature tend to prompt a certain level of scepticism, even in the absence of any hints of potentially undesirable consequences. Since the genetic tragedy of Thalidomide in the 1950s and 1960s, the nuclear nightmare that seized Chernobyl one grim morning in 1986 and other high-profile human-generated catastrophes of the 20th century (to say nothing of the deliberate abominations of science and technology in modern warfare),



*Synthetic Reality (Detail). 2008. Porcelain, glaze, foam, Polyfill and Plexiglas.*

every scientific breakthrough and every advance in technology must pay a price in suspicion for the stumblings of the past. Since contemporary artists, cognizant of the socially critical legacy of the *avant-garde*, more readily align themselves with a culture of dissent than with any positions implying esteem for the status quo, it is not surprising that the employment of science and technology in the manipulation of nature should today be most often addressed by art in apprehensive if not outright deprecatory tones.

Countering this conventional attitude of scepticism and resistance, not by laudatory means per se but rather through a simple suspension of cynicism, *Synthetic Reality* gives candid expression to genuine wonder at the potential hybrid offspring of science, technology and nature. With this installation, Beiner joins a small but growing number of artists who tentatively accept the promises that contemporary science and technology make not only to advance the quest for answers to questions about life and the composition of the cosmos and moreover to use the knowledge thus obtained to introduce expedient changes to the daily lives of human beings, but also to right the wrongs that science and technology themselves have inadvertently perpetrated in the past. Beiner, as the daughter of a chemist, is perhaps naturally disposed to giving science and technology the benefit of the doubt in such matters. In any event,





*Synthetic Reality (Detail of wall section). 2008.*

the willing suspension of judgment about biotechnology in *Synthetic Reality* translates to indulgence of the imagination in a free manipulation of vocabulary offered up by the forms of nature and the ingenuity of human design. Beiner's proliferating hybrid flora, still implicitly at the dawn of their reign, provide a glimpse of a strange and wondrous 'what if' world that calls for neither justification nor condemnation but only recognition of the power of creativity.

The impression of a world still unfolding rather than one ready formed is conveyed by *Synthetic Reality* partly in the contrast between the vertical relief composition – covering an imposing 3 by 9 metres of wall space, though still appearing compact and regular in its disposition – and the freestanding elements dispersed in asymmetrical clusters of sprouting hemispheres that spread across the gleaming gallery floor like a tropical archipelago crowned with a jungle of mutated vegetation in pink, orange, green and turquoise. The random dispersal of the bizarre plant-like forms, rising to varying heights from their ivory Plexiglas half domes, gives them the appearance of saplings that have taken root wherever errant winds have deposited seeds. Unlike the wall-mounted portion of the installation – which, given its composition from a multitude of identically shaped tiles, reflects the logical arrangement of a regular, albeit sagging, grid – the floor pieces seem to

have escaped from the orderly rows of seedling trays or laboratory incubators to flourish in the wild as the progenitors of a new and partly artificial reality.

Emphasizing the constructed character of this reality and implicating bioengineering processes such as gene splicing in its constitution, Beiner produced all of the porcelain components of the installation from approximately 50 moulds, then cut the resulting slipcast forms apart and reassembled them into unique hybrids. Coated in a white base glaze then bathed in thick applications of other glazes calculated to melt into the white in lucid layers of colour, these porcelain elements are, in their glossy liquid surfaces, partly the products of gravity and chance. Over the variegated field of glazed forms and by means of an aspirator, Beiner applied cursive lines of contrasting glaze to be pulled into the flowing disintegration of surface during firing. The result is a motley flux of juicy colour. Picking up some of the hues of this field and intensifying their saturation and opacity are multiple flower buds sewn by Beiner from thin sheet foam and stuffed into pillowy distension with Polyfill. Held in place by elastic that constricts snugly around the ceramic stems, these eccentric flowers, attractive but artificial, originate in reflection on biodegradable plastics, biofuels and other uses for vegetable-based oils.

While such substances are the most obvious





*Synthetic Reality (Wall Section).* 2008. Porcelain, glaze, foam and Polyfill.  
28 x 9 ft.

referents of Beiner's title, multiple dialectics were at work in the evolution of *Synthetic Reality* and other syntheses, even more basic to the genesis of the installation, resulted from the process of hybridization. Key to teasing out the implications of these is the fact that the starting point for the large wall-mounted portion of the installation was Beiner's childhood memory of a room decorated in raised patterns of flocked wallpaper. Like works made earlier in her career, *Synthetic Reality* embarked from conscious reflection on the decorative and more specifically the ornamental. The regular repetition of tiles in the massive wall section bears witness to the role that pattern played in preliminary stages of the installation's development, but the final effect of the work can only be described as a devolution of pattern back into the random folds of the very nature that presumably first inspired it. The dialectic of nature and ornament in Beiner's work could, in other words, be said to have progressed through disintegration of the abstract lines of the decorative and absorption of these by the concrete forms of the natural world. The resultant hybridity was then carried forward as the implicit foundation for a new, synthetic reality.

For Beiner, despite her demiurgic role in this novel synthesis of the real, the experience of constructing the installation part-by-part led inevitably to a degree of alienation from it – a level of

estrangement from the forest through intense focus on the trees. As a consequence, her first full encounter with the curious, synthetic world that she had created, came only as the installation was being mounted at Arizona State University's Ceramics Research Center. Like an explorer in an alien realm, Beiner quickly succumbed to the inclination to document the experience, probing the forms and her relationship to them through a series of drawings in water-soluble crayon, Magic Markers, pencil and pen made directly on a wall at the centre of the gallery. More than afterthoughts, these drawings could be seen as crucial evidence of the persistently personal dimension of *Synthetic Reality*: something that might otherwise have slipped imperceptibly beneath the anonymity of nature and the impersonal character of technology. Through her drawings, Beiner claims this artificial world definitively as her own, asserting its primary significance on the level of the pure and disinterested imagination and ultimately raising it far above all controversies over biotechnology and the fate of natural realities.

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*Above and Below: Synthetic Reality (Details of Wall Section). 2008.*



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