

Schmacke's installation at St. Louis Art Museum is smart, provocative

BY DAVID BONETTI

POST-DISPATCH VISUAL ARTS CRITIC

Sunday, Apr. 12 2009

Having grown up in Germany, Claudia Schmacke can't be expected to know the Dylan Thomas poem "The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower." But her installation piece and two videos at the St. Louis Art Museum derive from and meditate on the same wonder Thomas felt at the energy unleashed by the natural world — in his case, his teenage sexuality. (He wrote the poem when he was 19.)

Schmacke's main work here, the installation "Time Reel," is a gallery-scale construction of a tangle of transparent plastic tubes through which green-dyed water and air course.

The work, however simple, is a marvelous evocation of the life force. The surging water, the color of nature in its politicized sense, pulses with a regular beat like a heart. Invisible, but audible pumps behind the wall from which the tubes dangle, keep the water flowing at a hectic speed.

If Schmacke had dyed the water red, we would read the coursing liquid as blood, and that would be that. Green is open to more metaphors. As a child, I was taken to a mackerel run near my aunt's house. The frenzy of the fish, so tightly packed together you felt as if you could walk across them, to return upstream in order to spawn where they were spawned was fascinating but also terrifying.

There is something of that terror to Schmacke's installation. The pulsing water brought to mind tadpoles, herring, the tiny fish used as bait, drawn by a mysterious, unknowable force to return to the place where they were born to keep the life cycle whole and preserve their species.

Schmacke is the latest Freund Fellow to have a show in the museum's venerable "Currents" series. Fellows teach for two two-month residencies at Washington University's Graduate School of Art. A couple of previous Fellows didn't quite deserve the museum exhibition that accompanies the gig, but Schmacke certainly

does. Her work is smart, provocative and alluring.

Charlotte Eyerman, the museum's curator of modern art, has smartly installed in an adjacent gallery a number of works from the museum's collection that complement Schmacke's installation. The works deal with water, air and light, and they are a nice reminder that the museum has a more interesting contemporary art collection than it often lets on.

The highlight here is "Vortex," a 1998 sculpture by Olafur Eliasson, in which a tornado is created in a tall cylinder of water. Although it is purely by chance, the reflection of blue fluorescent light from a nearby Dan Flavin work gives the Eliasson, halfway between artwork and science experiment, an additional layer of mystery.

In her two videos, installed in another part of the museum, Schmacke pursues her interest in natural forces.

"Umbilicus" was shot in Rome while Schmacke was a resident there at the Casa di Goethe, a German cultural center. It's an abstraction and, initially, it's hard to figure out exactly what's being visualized. But there's no doubt that the subject is water. In fact, the video is a straight-on shot of a drainage pipe in which water surges and gurgles with a sucking sound.

Water, of course, is central to the myth of Rome, which grew in the ancient world into a metropolis because of its great aqueducts. After the Renaissance, Rome's fountains became symbols of the city. By making a work in Rome of a drainage pipe, Schmacke is continuing that tradition but with tongue-in-cheek.

At moments during the work's 25-minute length, some sort of electrical charge, another form of energy, buzzes across the image. Ambiguous in its intentions, the work is both disturbing and mesmerizing.

"Dark Matters," a 4 1/2-minute video taped at La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles, is also a vision of primeval nature. The dark, viscous tar pit emits gases that rise luxuriantly, forming bubbles that collapse onto themselves or suddenly burst, bringing to mind the title of Flannery O'Connor's story, "Everything that Rises Must Converge."

Schmacke's video is a demonstration of that notion. In "Dark Matters," with its Hollywoodish title, Schmacke has made a little movie that achieves a lot of what "Jurassic Park" did, but for a considerably smaller budget.