

The New York Times

The Eye of the Beheld

By: David Colman
August 26, 2007

ASK the federal agency charged with policing products that can be labeled “organic”: it is one of today’s most abused terms, right up there with “guaranteed” electronics and “luxury” apartments.

That is not even counting the vaguer and more figurative sense of the word. Here “organic” suggests something unforced and natural, be it a teak salad bowl, a perfume or a foreign aid policy.

But few other words better describe the art and the sudden It-Gal status of Paula Hayes, whose biomorphically shaped blown-glass terrariums were a natural outgrowth of the gardening she did while she was in art school. Marianne Boesky, the art dealer, was the first to buy one; another, Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, decided to show the seductively planted terrariums as art in 2004. Ms. Hayes’s career just took off from there (organically, as they say).

You might expect Ms. Hayes, who also has a brisk new business as a landscape designer, to embrace a nature-bound aesthetic at home, but no. The Brooklyn house she shares with her husband and son is awash not in organic matter, but with various artifacts that are distinctly, and even badly, synthetic.

“I have a very particular mode of collecting,” said Ms. Hayes, who was not even aware she was “collecting” until she came across what she considers a high point in the A-for-effort school of artistic production. It is a ceramic bust she found in an antiques shop on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn. Missing even the slightest sense of natural touch, it is undeniably not the work of a master.

“It had a strange beauty to it,” she recalled. “I kept looking at it and looking and thinking, ‘Should I get it?’ There’s this compelling sincerity to the gaze. There’s something solemn about it that I love, this intensity. I really feel that a person was sitting there — that it wasn’t done from memory — and that whoever did it was concentrating only on the face.”

This amateur effort is most apparent when you examine the whole piece. “I think they exhausted themselves after the eyes,” she said. “The back is really difficult to look at.”

It even provokes levels of perplexity. “I think it’s a young man, an old soul,” she said. “But the person I bought it from thought it was a woman.”

No matter. “There’s a sense of someone doing something passionately but not having the knowledge of how to do



BUT IS IT ART? Probably not. But Paula Hayes, the gardener and artist, absolutely had to have it.
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CRISTINA GRAJALES GALLERY

it,” Ms. Hayes said. “That hybrid of experiences is really meaningful to me.” With the bust, the artist’s single-mindedness seems transferred to the blank straight-ahead stare of the subject. “So there’s someone there, looking out, too, at the same time that someone’s there looking at it,” she said.

Of course, Ms. Hayes’s own artworks lack any sense of amateurishness, even as she embraces the lack of control that working with plants entails. Her latest works, which she calls “green bombs” (she is still thinking about that name), are densely planted balls that hang from the ceiling and are free to spread however they can, like terrariums gone wild.

In short, Ms. Hayes has a keen eye for the passionate moment when art, or thought, or life pushes through with all its might and begins to bud. It is not surprising, then, that she should be equally passionate about creating sheltered spaces (birdhouses, terrariums, planters) where such spontaneous generation can happen. Who says living in a bubble is a bad thing?



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