

Los Angeles Times

Review Artist Aaron Fowler's work at Diane Rosenstein: Loaded in more ways than one



A detail of Aaron Fowler's "Mom Knows" (2015), mixed media. (Diane Rosenstein Gallery)

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Aaron Fowler's raucous assemblage paintings are packed with stuff. The term "mixed media" barely encapsulates materials that include shimmering silvery CDs, bits of clothing, folding tables, trash bags, inkjet photos and mud.

The pieces are also packed with complex emotional energy. A single Fowler work can ricochet between deep affection and mortal terror, both leavened by a hefty dose of wry wit. At Diane Rosenstein Gallery, it's a sight to see.

"Mom Knows" is illustrative. Ten feet tall and nearly 15 feet wide, the wall relief has the public scale of a commercial billboard. Yet the New York-based artist uses the format to plumb an intimate relationship between mother and son, inevitably conflicted but laced with love.

A big, grinning portrait head looks out from the wall. A baseball cap crowns her fuzzy head. She's missing a few teeth, but the bright pink lipstick that lights up her goofy smile is repeated on a Superman logo patterned across her face. Mom is a big presence — domineering in ways both extravagantly cheerful and slightly unnerving.

Forget Whistler's diffident mother; this is Supermom — also for good or ill.

A thick fiber-rope "necklace" unfurls out onto the gallery floor, its chunkiness like a silk cord on steroids. The pendant is apparently a nominal portrait of her bearded son, made from shattered mirror glass that reflects a viewer within its faceted surface. Part bound prisoner and part cherished locket-memento, he's a satellite tethered to maternal terra firma.

Fowler is "keeping it 100," aiming for uncomfortable truths, as another work is multiply stamped. Spectral, Colonial-era pilgrims offer heaping platters of food to brightly adorned Indians while, tucked behind them and over to one side, a young black woman stares straight at a viewer. She grins and winks, and the cheery schoolbook celebration of intercultural Thanksgiving takes a sudden, harrowing turn.

It's a devastating edit, deftly made.

The show, Fowler's first in Los Angeles and his solo gallery debut, includes an additional 11 large-scale assemblage paintings. They draw on precedents, both formally and conceptually, as diverse as Elliott Hundley and Kerry James Marshall. The imagery sometimes gets swamped by the deluge of materials, but if you fight your way through the mountain of social debris, it's usually worth the push.

Diane Rosenstein Gallery, 831 N. Highland Ave., Hollywood, (323) 462-2790, through March 12. Closed Sundays and Mondays.
www.dianeroseinstein.com