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Co-Creating With Fungal Mold

Silas Inoue's "mold paintings" set a dark, suggestive mood.



Silas Inoue, "' (2022), mold on oak panel in sealed acrylic box frame, 16 1/2 x 14 x 2 7/8 inches (all images courtesy Ulterior Gallery; photograph by Sebastian Bach)

Inside a rectangular vitrine, a tiered plastic structure resembles an architectural model of a dilapidated city or crumbling forest. Each of its platforms teems with sagging vertical shapes, suggesting sci-fi skyscrapers or ghostly trees in various states of decay. A dull, gray-white fuzz

covers both the vertical shapes and the platforms on which they stand, giving the whole structure a lumpy and haggard appearance. The fuzz is actually mycelia growing from yogurt that artist Silas Inoue spread on the artwork, “Infrastructure” (2022), to cultivate fungi. A bronze respiratory filter, evoking a masked frog, sits atop the vitrine to provide the fungal mold with oxygen and to prevent its spores from escaping into the room.



Silas Inoue, “Infrastructure” (2022) acrylic cover, wood, concrete, silicon, radiant acrylic, plastic, mold, and bronze respiratory system, 25 1/4x 26 x 9 1/4 inches (photograph by Jason Mandella)

Elsewhere in *Night Bloom Central*, the artist’s brooding exhibition at Ulterior Gallery, hang two examples of what Inoue calls “mold paintings.” Cryptically titled “.,” and “:,” (both 2022), each artwork is composed of mycelia growing from yogurt spread on a wooden panel. The works’ downy surfaces and mottled, black-and-white patterns summon images of an interior designer for a big box store who decided to misbehave. The designer, in this case, is the fungal mold, raising questions about where agency resides when an artist creates the aleatory conditions for non-human organisms to produce objects intended for human aesthetic appreciation. The mold paintings’ abstractions appear less decrepit than the *Infrastructure* series’ droopy, quasi-figurative contents; the contrast highlights how context can determine whether humans perceive mold as a thriving organism or a sign of decay.



Silas Inoue, "Future Friture-Turritopsis Dohrnii" (2022), 42 1/8 x 13 x 13 inches (photograph by Jason Mandella)

BioArt — a term coined by artist Eduardo Kac in the late 1990s, today denoting art that works with living beings — has experienced a surge of creative and critical interest in recent years. Inoue's work with fungal mold fits this zeitgeist: from Precious Okoyomon's kudzu installations to Tuomas A. Laitinen's octopus films, artists have been paying increased attention to the interdependencies among various organisms, influenced by everything from the legacy of biologist Lynn Margulis's field-defining work on symbiosis to anthropologist Anna Tsing's astute study of mushroom picking, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015). While much BioArt incorporates laboratory methods and has a sociopolitical bent, Inoue's outputs are pure posthuman ambience. His mold paintings, for example, have formal affinities with the splotchy rectangles of Anicka Yi's *Force Majeure* (2017), an installation of bacterial growths collected from New York City's Chinatown and Koreatown neighborhoods. But whereas the viewer's understanding of Yi's installation turns in part on its underlying concepts, the emphasis in Inoue's paintings is on their visual atmosphere.



Silas Inoue, "Cell" (2021), acrylic, oak, silicone, plastic, dried mushroom, and radiant acrylic, 11 7/8 x 11 7/8 x 11 7/8 inches (photograph by Jason Mandella)

The captivating variety of non-living artworks also included in *Night Bloom Central* makes this emphasis clear. "Future Friture-Turritopsis Dohrnii" (2022) consists of a jellyfish-esque blob, made from cast sugar, ponderously floating in a vitrine filled with golden, viscous cooking oil. "Mesh" (2022) is a smudgy, maximalist graphite and watercolor drawing that depicts scores of chrysalises dangling from dense foliage. "Cell" (2021) features a wooden insectile sculpture ensconced within a translucent acrylic sphere spangled with detritus. The exhibition abounds with sci-fi leitmotifs and narrative innuendos but Inoue isn't trying to tell futuristic stories or conduct rigorous lab experiments so much as set a dark, suggestive mood. His artistic cabinet of curiosities remains alive to the sheer strangeness of other-than-human worlds both real and imaginary.

Silas Inoue: Night Bloom Central continues at *Ulterior Gallery* (424 Broadway, Soho, Manhattan) until October 15. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.