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## Lina Puerta's Art Mimics Botanical and Female Anatomical Forms

Puerta's artworks strike a gentle balance between whimsy and sincerity.



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Lina Puerta, "Untitled (Tree and Frame)" (2014), 57 x 38 x 5 inches, concrete, polyurethane foam, reed mesh, wire, paint, fabric, lace, leather, faux fur, artificial moss and plant, gilded frame, chains, broken jewelry, feathers, flocking, Swarovski crystals and beads (images courtesy Courtesy of KODA and Hunter East Harlem Gallery; photos by Argenis Apolinario)

The lobby wall outside Hunter East Harlem Gallery teems with artworks that resemble irregularly shaped vertical gardens. The scruffy artificial greenery, from Lina Puerta's *Botánico* series (2010 – present), spreads across nooks and crannies as if part of the building's architecture and is festooned with incongruous decorations. Gold and silver jewelry chains dangle from fronds and grasses. Rhinestones, beads, and sequined fabrics sparkle on the ground beneath the imitation plant leaves. Long threads of decorative fringe hang from the verdant arrangements like hair extensions. These festive, costume-y details celebrate the artifice of botanical sculptures that appear actual from a distance but, on closer inspection, are unabashedly ersatz.



Lina Puerta, "Sisterhood" (2003), clay, acrylic paint and synthetic hair, 6 x 12 x 10 inches (overall arrangement varies)

The *Botánicos* serve as a fitting entry to Puerta's under-the-radar survey, *Migration, Nature, and the Feminine*. Curated by Klaudia Ofwona Draber, with Sofia Ramirez as associate curator, the delightful mid-career exhibition showcases the artist's impish, motley range. Several works pretend to be dilapidated paintings whose frayed supports have been overtaken by nature, as in the tree roots that have merged with a broken picture frame in "Untitled (Tree and Frame)"

(2014). Others playfully mimic intimate female anatomical forms, such as the comical grouping of clay sculptures in the shape of breasts, with synthetic hair hanging from their nipples, “Sisterhood” (2003). Still others are less dimensional but no less colorful or materially various, as in a series of handmade paper tapestries, bedecked with sequins, lace, and food packaging, that depict portraits of Latino farmworkers.



Installation view of Lina Puerta, “Árbol (Tree)” (2007), fabric, metal, lights, sandbags, fiberfill and wooden stool, 10 x 4 x 4 inches (adjustable height)

This carnivalesque profusion of materials and forms finds its most charming expressions in the many works that evoke worlds within worlds. In the *Specimen* series (2016), small glass display domes encase fanciful, prickly plant forms that look like botanical samples from another planet. The *Agua Viva* series (2010) features compact vintage suitcases cracked open like music boxes, their interiors serving as planting beds for lush, synthetic landscapes that contain actual running water. In “Árbol (Tree)” (2007), a conical tent of floor-to-ceiling fabrics contains a stool for visitors to sit inside its plush, vaginal interior. All the artworks strike a gentle balance between whimsy and sincerity, which keeps their allusions to sexual anatomy from appearing cringeworthy. None are overly invested in their own theoretical rationale, which leaves Puerta free to construct her surprising artistic environments from the ground up, through the accumulation of imaginative details.

It's a critical commonplace to say that practices like Puerta's question distinctions between nature and culture. Yet her work goes well beyond such questions and instead takes it as given that the work can be and do what it wants, how it wants, enjoying itself along the way. For those interested in classification, it would be worth considering how aspects of Puerta's oeuvre relate to similar, but also subtly different, historical and contemporary artistic tendencies, from 1960s and '70s ecofeminist earth goddess tropes to the Pattern and Decoration movement's transvaluation of materials stereotyped as feminine, to the recent trend of incorporating both living and artificial plants into installations. But first, that would require acknowledgement that while Puerta often operates in a minor (that is, lighthearted) key, her work bears on major themes — from postcolonialism to posthumanism — in unique ways. This enticing survey constitutes an excellent step in that direction.

Lina Puerta: Migration, Nature, and the Feminine *continues at Hunter East Harlem Gallery (2180 3rd Avenue, East Harlem, New York) until February 5.*