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Mortality, time key to winter shows at MOCA Cleveland

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“Dirge,” the major winter exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, takes you to the other side but doesn’t strand you there: While its focus is mortality, its message is one of variety, hope and engagement. It “ends” in “Epitaph,” a witty installation of variable dimensions in which the artist Pedro Reyes invites viewers to chisel their own epitaphs in a sort of intellectually preemptive move. By presenting so many images and representations of the end, “Dirge” nudges the viewer to contemplate his or her own mortality. A profoundly reflective, impressively interwoven show, it occupies the museum’s Main Gallery and Rosalie and Morton Cohen Family Gallery.

Curated by Megan Lykins Reich, program director and assistant curator at MOCA Cleveland, “Dirge” consists of works by 23 artists spanning video, collage, photography, radically treated photography, carpentry and assemblage. A commissioned exhibit by Baltimore-based artist Sara VanDerBeek that focuses on the Cleveland cityscape occupies the museum’s smaller Toby Levan Lewis Gallery. David Norr, MOCA Cleveland’s chief curator, organized the VanDerBeek, which consists of photography, sculpture and abstract installation.

The displays run concurrently. Both are notable and both deal with time – “Dirge” with its finality, the VanDerBeek with its passage. Both are remarkable for visual appeal and philosophical depth. And both demand a second visit – at least.

Among the most memorable images/experiences in “Dirge”: Guido van der Werve’s “Everything Is Going To Be Alright,” a giant video of a giant freighter bearing down on a man of dauntingly small, human dimension; David Wojnarowicz’s “Untitled,” a black-and-white photograph of the artist buried until only parts of his face are visible; Oscar Munoz’s “Aliento,” a series of silver disks which, when exhaled upon, reveal photographs of the dead (talk about the breath of life); and “Intra-Venus,” a 16-channel video installation by Hannah Wilke, an early feminist whose work here tracked her last year; she died of lymphoma in 1993.

The more modest VanDerBeek display is also contemplative; for example, two large photographs of the remains of the Alhambra, a gorgeous, block-long apartment building at East 86th Street and Wade Park Avenue in Cleveland’s Hough Area, offer glimpses into the building’s decay, reflecting on each other across the room as if to quicken back to life. Another print, “Aperture,” plays visual tricks: while it’s two-dimensional, the gash of broken wall at its center seems to add a third, the way it looks changing as the viewer changes position.

Perusing the VanDerBeek feels like strolling through a formerly vibrant neighborhood. Now that the Alhambra has been demolished, tracings like VanderBeek’s seem disproportionately valuable.

WHAT: ‘Dirge: Reflections on (Life and) Death,’ Sara VanDerBeek

WHERE: Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, 11400 Euclid Ave.

WHEN: Through Sunday, June 8.

TICKETS & INFO: \$5 to \$8; members and children younger than 6 admitted free. Call 216-421-8671 or visit www.mocacleveland.org. Collaborative events stemming from “Dirge” are planned with numerous institutions including the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Science at Case Western Reserve University. See www.mocacleveland.org/calendar for more information.

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