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‘Seven Deadly Sins’: A Vice-Fest in the NYC Suburbs

Seven related exhibits in Connecticut and Westchester explore the list of ethical offenses



Emilie Clark's 'Sweet Corruptions' (2012-2013) comments on consumption and decay with desiccated food waste and semisolid and liquid waste in sealed Mason jars. The work is part of her show 'The Delicacy of Decomposition' at the Katonah Museum of Art, the 'Gluttony' part of the Seven Deadly Sins series of exhibits.

MARGARET FOX/EMILIE CLARK/MORGAN LEHMAN GALLERY

By

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The spread is magnificent in its decay: desiccated orange peels and peppers, bones smooth as driftwood and jars whose putrefying contents resemble a science experiment gone amok.

The real-life still life, which could easily feed a small army of raccoons, represents months' worth of family food waste painstakingly collected and preserved by artist Emilie Clark. It also serves as the centerpiece of an exhibit about gluttony at the Katonah Museum of Art in

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Westchester, N.Y., part of a multi-museum project called “The Seven Deadly Sins” exploring the evergreen list of ethical offenses: greed, gluttony, pride, lust, envy, wrath and sloth.

The first joint curatorial effort of the Fairfield/Westchester Museum Alliance, the seven shows approach the sin theme in different ways—some with contemporary art, others with more historic examples, and one with a participatory installation involving comfy recliners.

Collaborating museums include two in Connecticut—the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield and the Bruce Museum in Greenwich—and five in New York: the Katonah Museum, the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in Peekskill, the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, and Wave Hill in the Bronx.

“We thought about doing the seven virtues, but really, who wants to see a show about that?” said Bartholomew Bland, deputy director of the Hudson River Museum.

For “Envy: One Sin, Seven Stories,” at the Hudson River Museum through Sept. 27, Mr. Bland called Adrien Broom, a Brooklyn-based multimedia artist with a strong narrative bent. Using photographs, three-dimensional tableaux and a literal “web” of envy, she riffs on fairy tales like “Snow White,” “Cinderella” and “Beauty and the Beast.”

“I’ve always been kind of obsessed with these whimsical, kind-of-off fairy tales,” said Ms. Broom, 35 years old. “They’re so rich not only in terms of envy, but all the sins.”

To explore the greed theme, the Neuberger has mounted “Gold,” on view through Oct. 11, featuring 22 contemporary artists—and more glitz than a “Real Housewives” reunion.

But beneath the seductive glitter, including a gold-plated trash can, many of the works have a sinister subtext. Chris Burden’s “Gold Bullets,” for example, are so beguiling—Avis Larson, the Neuberger’s assistant curator, likened them to “little jewels”—that their destructive purpose might be forgotten.

Visitor Maryn Brown, 16, was struck by Todd Pavlisko’s work, “All the Money I Found in a Year,” which displays the loose change he accumulated from 2010 to 2015, plated in gold. Noting the piece “turned something already of value into something of even more value,” she said the work suggests that “people always want more.”

Ms. Clark’s “The Delicacy of Decomposition,” at the Katonah Museum through Sept. 6, might be said to operate in the opposite way. The assembled food garbage—including egg shells, corn cobs, bread crusts and chicken bones—has a strange beauty, which inspired a series of related watercolors, also on display.

“One thing I found fascinating were that these everyday objects, like the end of an onion, could be these exquisite objects and a source of all this information, artistically, from color to line to structure,” said Ms. Clark.

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“The contradictions are wonderful,” said Darsie Alexander, the Katonah Museum’s executive director, of the show’s two elements. “There’s a real grittiness to the detritus and then there are these amazing, ephemeral, delicate watercolors.”

Katonah resident Sebastian Oliver, 39, and his 3-year-old son Andrew were among the visitors checking out the installation on a recent Saturday afternoon. After Andrew contrasted the project with his own family’s eating habits—throw out the leftovers, buy new food—his father was moved to comment, “maybe we should compost.”

In its exploration of pride, the Bruce Museum’s show, on view through Oct. 18, traces the vice’s appearance in more than 40 works dating as far back as the Renaissance. Pieces range from an early 19th-century caricature of a haughty aristocrat by Honoré Daumier to a 2014 drawing by artist Fay Ku, showing the back of a human figure bedecked in peacock feathers.

“I wanted it to be provocative,” said Susan Ball, the Bruce’s deputy director and the show’s co-curator. “I wanted people to ask, when do you cross the line from healthy self-esteem to arrogant, self-aggrandizement?”

Wave Hill, the Bronx-based garden and cultural center, focuses its sin exploration on the natural world in “Wrath—Force of Nature,” on display through Sept. 7. It gathers painterly depictions of nature’s dangerous side, a nod to Wave Hill’s ecologically minded programming, said Jennifer McGregor, who co-curated the show. Works such as Diane Burko’s “Arctic Cyclone,” based on a NASA image of havoc wreaked by climate change, suggest the growing human role in nature’s wrath.

Art lovers for whom all this might sound too exhausting might consider heading directly to “Sloth,” on view at the Aldrich through Sept. 19.

Conceived by Swedish artist Mats Bigert and Sina Najafi, editor in chief of the New York-based cultural magazine Cabinet, the exhibit lets visitors armchair-travel to its six sister shows—including “Lust,” which already closed at Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art—via plush recliners and looping videos tours.

As part of the scene, the artists created tabloid papers titled “Sloth” and hung them from wooden dowels—evoking a kind of “exclusive club of sloth,” as Mr. Bigert put it. In keeping with the laziness theme, the publication offers repurposed content about idleness in all its forms.

But getting visitors to give up their frenetic, attention-deficit ways, and to indulge in the sin of sloth themselves, isn’t so easy.

Ira Neustadt, 64, caught “Sloth” on his way back to New York after taking in “Pride” at the Bruce Museum. Would he consider lingering in one of those comfy chairs before getting back on the road? “I’m too hyper to do that,” said Mr. Neustadt, already mid-stride.