

Messing with Mother Nature

By Holly Myers
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"It seems the more we mess with Nature," curator Pam Posey begins in the essay that accompanies "Nature (Interrupted)," her show at the 18th Street Arts Center, "the more she messes with us."

This "embattled relationship," as Posey puts it, is the subject of the thoughtfully organized, handsomely presented exhibition.

Maura Bendett's two wall-mounted sculptures, "Melt" and "Photon Star," are the most visually dazzling works: giddy explosions of baubles and beads (made from plastic, resin and paper draped on a many-limbed steel frame) that give a taste of what foliage might look like if Mother Nature were an especially creative 15-year-old girl.

Christine Nguyen's "They Get Released to Conjure Up a Miracle" (a multi-paneled, semi-photographic piece made of sections of drawings rendered on Mylar and then run through a color film processor) and Lothar Schmitz's "Strategy for Survival" (a large, free-standing sculpture of a hillside dotted with biodome-like half-globes) both feel like models or diagrams from some other world.

Joyce Campbell and Jeff Cain, by contrast, find the fantastic in the actual -- she in the glaciers of Antarctica, which she reproduces in large, elegant silver gelatin prints, and he in the strange and beautiful sound made by wind rushing through a cluster of radio towers on Mt. Wilson, which he's recorded and incorporates in an installation called "Dead Air."

The most surprising -- though in some ways most appropriate -- of the artists is Orlan, who has made a career of "messing with" the natural state of her own physiology by way of plastic surgery. Coming unexpectedly upon a petri dish containing preserved fragments of the artist's flesh, in a piece called "Les petits reliquaires: 'Ceci est mon corps . . . Ceci est mon logiciel' " (Little Reliquaries: "This is my body . . . This is my software"), isn't especially pleasant, but it certainly drives the theme of the show home.

18th Street Arts Center, 1639 18th St., Santa Monica, (310) 453-3711, through Sept. 14. Closed Saturdays and Sundays.