

Michelle Segre

at DANIEL WEINBERG, 9 September–28 October

Michelle Segre's first solo exhibition in Los Angeles features two bodies of work that, on first glance, seem to be unrelated: oversized, hyper-realistic mushrooms made of beeswax, acrylic, foam, and paper-mâché, and abstract ink drawings depicting weird fantasy landscapes. Enlarged for convenient inspection, the mushrooms appear to have no connection to the small drawings. But these distinct bodies of work are accompanied by a painstaking scrutiny of macro- and microcosms, the gigantic mushrooms offering a close-up view of physical details and the small drawings addressing the big picture. The often-disrupted crystalline structures articulated

in Segre's two-dimensional works mirror the rigorous nature-made structures of her three-dimensional pieces, which are themselves disrupted by strange discolorations and implied processes of disintegration. Together, her images and objects elicit a viewer's fascination before uncanny alternations between highly structured formations and random accidents, equally organic phenomena that make up incredibly complex systems.

Segre's works on paper, said to start out as mere doodlings, have grown out of the landscapes she has made in Italy over the last few years. They are playful and chilling visions of structures growing and mutating, getting out of hand until they soften, turn into rubble, and decompose into formless nothingness. Drawn in black, brown, or blue marker, some have been highlighted with yellow or orange. Occasionally appearing among the dense, webbed networks formed by the crisp lines are fragments of recognizable objects, disconnected letters, and even full words spelling out cryptic messages. In some works, it's possible to discern a head, an animal, a book, or a part of a stadium. In others, seemingly urgent utterances, such as "me, me, me" or "absolutely no!" are lost in the chaos of tangled lines. Most of Segre's drawings evoke



eerie—if thoroughly cartoon—visions of some future Day After the Apocalypse, when the details she outlines will stand for the whole of a past world. All the objects and letters lie out of proportion, as if they were mutations of the random patterns that surround them.

Segre's vision is a blend of digitized virtual-space fantasy and realism. She uses multiple vantage points and perspectives to display a warped space in which some of the objects are seen from above, some in elevation, and some from inside, looking out. The viewer's distance from the depicted objects varies greatly, as elements appear to leap from the picture plane, making a sausage (or perhaps, a balloon), a television, a gnarled tree, or a goat abruptly appear to be large and up-close, while the rocky landscapes around them look even smaller and further away. In other spots, a structure is drawn with obsessive care to suggest intricate connections. Here, a viewer feels as if she were flying over vast landscapes in a constantly tilting vehicle. Losing all sense of proportion, there is no telling if the patterns out of which the drawings are built congeal into forms to be read as illusionist rocks, houses, or cobwebs—

or if they chart, in an extremely enlarged format, complex molecular structures.

High-density zones alternate with great empty areas. Just as André Breton described early Surrealists, Segre also deprives us of a frame of reference, causing viewers to experience amazement and discomfort simultaneously. Since the proportions of the objects in the landscapes, as well as the proportions of the landscapes themselves, change abruptly, one experiences a virtual cruising, being thrown from one vantage point to another with whiplash speed and amazing fluidity. Segre takes delight in a web of lines receding or protruding, playing with the pleasure of possibilities, where familiar objects may be accidents or merely mirages.

The vertigo caused by the time-space net of the drawings and their intricately woven webs of infinity is increased by the presence of the mushrooms, which add a more sensuous, physical dimension, as well as a full-blown sense of biological mystery to Segre's abstract representations of entropy. Fleshy, flowery, and erotic, the six larger-than-lifese mushrooms, some of which are taller than a person, make viewers feel Lilliputian. In the face of these gargantuan fungus and the virtual spaces of the drawings, viewers are presented with a vision of incessant growth and decay—nature as a work in progress.

Éva Forgács teaches at Art Center College of Design.

Michelle Segre
Untitled, 2000
Beeswax, paper-mâché,
acrylic, and metal armature
43½" x 48" x 34½"