

Exhibit review, *Kansas City Star*

Mary Kay/Rebecca Morales at Grand Arts, 2008

By Elisabeth Kirsch

Much of today's art is awash in refuse, creepy looking organic forms and other detritus — what has been called “the abject.”

The abject came to the forefront in the 1980s and '90s, when AIDS became a worldwide epidemic. When artist Kiki Smith created wax sculptures of men and women with fluids dripping unabashedly from various orifices, it was an extreme contrast to the intellectually based conceptual art that dominated that era.

The abject possesses even wider currency in today's art. Witness such recent exhibitions as “Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century,” at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, where objects rescued from the rubbish heap were front and central.

As the body is a metaphor for Gaia, or the earth, it makes sense that artists also apply concepts of the abject to artwork that focuses on the environment. Two such artists are Rebecca Morales and Mary Kay, whose very different painting styles are on view at Grand Arts.

Mary Kay, who is English, lives in Lindsborg, Kan., where she is associate professor of art at Bethany College. (In 2005 she had a solo exhibit, “Nature Remains,” at the Kansas City Artists Coalition.)

She paints with oil on both canvas and paper, drawing from a repertoire of imagery that includes skeletons, seed pods, teeth, flowers and weeds, specimens she has collected from rural Kansas.

In Kay's paintings images from her found trove are often combined, as if in a dreamscape, floating in environments that are ethereal and rainbow-colored, or, conversely, as if they have been recently disemboweled from layers of earthly strata.

Her most compelling subjects are those that incorporate skeletal remains. Rows of naked teeth — Are they animal or human? What did they eat, and/or what ate them? — are definitely good for a shudder or two.

Other works, such as “Uproot,” which combine abstraction with references from nature, too closely resemble earlier art by the influential American painter Terry Winters.

In Rebecca Morales' work, the abject merges with centuries-old art history traditions of animal and plant studies. Her precisely executed pictures are rendered in gouache, watercolor and pastel on calf vellum. Morales' visual predecessors range from Albrecht Durer to Northern Baroque memento mori flower studies, as well as the wildly romantic and sensuous botanical prints of the 19th-century English Victorians.

Her hyper-real style, which startles in its verisimilitude, also relates psychologically to the trompe l'oeil work of such early American painters as William Harnett.

Morales may draw spiritually from this artistic lineage, but with some important twists makes these landscape studies her own. For one thing, any sense of the holistic, part of older humanistic traditions, has been displaced by a forensic sensibility peculiar to our time.

At first glance, her paintings appear to be bagged specimens of plant life that elude established categories. Her subjects are simultaneously beautiful but creepy, as their phosphorescent, neon-bright colors suggest post-nuclear states of mutation.

Current concepts of the grotesque, in which boundary violations are the norm, also inhabit Morales' art. In works such as "Tamara's Cues," pretty little green patches of earth grow extra long roots that morph into human braids.

These in turn threaten to strangle anyone who gets too close. Such works seem endowed with repressed powers of sexual sublimation, adding to both their appeal and their pathology.

A sense of violation includes, unwittingly or not, Morales' use of calf vellum as the foundation of her artistic process. The luminosity and organic appeal of the vellum is undeniable, and it underscores the sense of vulnerability that informs this artist's work. Calf vellum is traditionally derived from unborn calves, however, so it may undermine the environmental concerns that seem paramount in her art.