

The Sky is the Limit

By Merrily Kerr

Beth Krebs isn't a daydreamer. So why do her sculptural installations look like the product of a wandering mind? In 'Wild Blue Yonder,' missing ceiling tiles reveal a celestial vision above an empty, office-like space as if the heavens had opened in answer to the prayer of a desperately bored worker. Deliverance from the soulless hell of corporate uniformity, with its cheap blue carpet and ugly white ceiling tile has arrived! Or has it?

Before entering the installation, a pattern of light on the gallery wall points our eyes skyward, portending something miraculous. Inside, a more prosaic scene unfolds. Above the cookie-cutter, office-like space is a pre-fab sky, a roughly constructed facsimile of a lovely summer's day composed of fuzzy, cotton wool clouds and a blue Styrofoam sky.

Krebs isn't into wish fulfillment – if you want to sit at your desk and dream of tropical islands, you're on your own. Instead, her transformation of everyday environments into the setting for not-quite-magical scenarios prompts us to question where we want to be and why, given that we're often physically inhabiting one space and mentally 'off yonder.'

As in 'Wild Blue Yonder,' an escape may prove to be a trap. To the sounds of light aircraft, cooing and flapping wings, a video shows artfully constructed birds alighting on a cable before flying off. A blimp chugs past on its tight circular circuit. Clouds float by. Before long, the same two pigeons are back on the cable. The simple life is one thing, but is this banality really what the trapped worker is longing for?

Maybe. With real, unadulterated nature literally only steps away, visitors to 'Wild Blue Yonder' have been known to linger, lounging on the floor and gazing upward. Like Olafur Eliasson's 2004 'Weather Project' at the Tate Modern, where hundreds lay on the museum's polished concrete floor and 'basked' in the cold, electric glow of a giant sun, Krebs succeeds in persuading visitors to suspend their disbelief and enjoy a feel-good fake.

Inspired by Gordon Matta-Clark's mission "...to convert a place into a state of mind," Krebs demurs at actually hacking out the side of the building as Matta-Clark did with projects like 'Day's End' on a Manhattan pier. Instead, she achieves her goal of "mentally occupying a space" by conjuring the confinement of the work-a-day world and suggesting a release in the bland 'perfection' of a flawless summer's day.

Krebs returns to generic office environments as the site of both economic production and stage set for the life of the mind. In one past video, a blimp sails languidly over rows of cubicles and down corridors, in a slow-mo tracing of a day's routine movements. Small,

slow and incongruous, the craft is almost hallucinatory, though given the role of blimps as oversized billboards, it's actually perfectly in keeping with its corporate surroundings.

Krebs once created an even more quixotic mental occupation of space during a residency at the McDowell Colony, during which she constructed a dropped ceiling amidst closely planted trees in the woods. With utterly no use value, the piece is a striking symbol of the complicated relationship between man and nature, possibly representing a senseless colonization of nature by mankind, or trees which have self-grafted a bionic appendage. It could be an end (an office so dilapidated that it has been reclaimed by nature) or a beginning (is this the way an office is born?). Either way, we glimpse how 'Wild Blue Yonder' could progress, should the sky invade the office or vice-versa.

The sheer implausibility of Krebs straight-faced installations fuels the playfulness of her work. It's a little pessimistic to imagine that an escape from the soulless anonymity of the stereotypical office space in 'Wild Blue Yonder' should necessitate a second breakout from the alternative reality. But there's humor in the irony, which is typical of Krebs' light touch, which in past pieces have included standpipes that belch as people pass by and a video of a tiny sailboat traversing a waterbed to the sound of people making whooshing wind sounds. At the risk of creating one-liners, Krebs uses simple materials to deliver illogical experiences that catch us off guard, prompting more personally meaningful responses.

Like the painters of Renaissance palazzo ceilings or Regime Ancien boudoir walls, Krebs commandeers every inch of her space to create a portal into another world, though trompe l'oeil illusionism and grand allegorical statements are not her style. With cherubs replaced by pigeons, 'Wild Blue Yonder' transports us heavenward only to bring us back down to earth by a vision of nature that is as idiosyncratic as our ways of thinking about the spaces we inhabit.

As the installation is obviously artificial, so are our ways of thinking about places. The pipe work on the ceiling (not only visible but painted fire engine red), clouds dangling from mobiles and animated birds make it clear that this scene isn't supposed to look realistic, which in turn begs the question of why we might imagine alternative worlds taking place on the other side of the ceiling tiles or drywall anyway. Like Hiraki Sawa's tranquil domestic scenes in which an airplane happens to fly through a kitchen or a tiny rocking horse bounds through a flokati, Krebs reintroduces an element of wonder into familiar places. But instead of telling stories, she deliberately leaves loose ends, prompting us to question the habits that drive our own lives and examine our own coping mechanisms and escape fantasies.

Beth Krebs gently prods our understanding of how our physical and mental occupation of spaces changes over time, how flimsy our routines can be revealed to be, and how deeply personal our behaviors in a place are. 'Wild Blue Yonder,' is a unique opportunity to both physically experience one of her environments and to join in with an alternative mental experience of a place that is new but extremely familiar. The office is empty, the workers have gone, and it's our presence alone that conjures the miraculous or mundane.