

THE DO LIST

Imagine Yourself a Spider, or a Softball Catcher, in Two Wattis Shows

By Sarah Hotchkiss  Jan 24, 2019



Diamond Stingily, Detail of 'In the Middle but in the Corner of 176th Place,' 2019. (Courtesy of the artist; Queer Thoughts, New York; and Ramiken, New York; Photo: Johnna Arnold)

From the street, it looks like the Wattis Institute is under construction. Newspaper pages covering the floor-to-ceiling windows and glass doors block all possible glimpses of the exhibitions inside. Even the night of the opening reception, this visual barrier stopped me in my tracks.

Did I get the date wrong? I checked my planner. *Nope.* I pushed open the gallery door with the irrational feeling that I was entering something that was no longer a public exhibition space, but something secret.

The two shows currently occupying the Wattis *do* usher in states of altered perception, so maybe the barrier feeling, in retrospect, was a premonition.

In Diamond Stingily's *Doing the Best I Can*, the viewer is placed in the role of a child athlete, surrounded by objects too large (a giant L-shaped shelf of trophies), too bright (a mobile light tower), too numerous (a line of the artist's rough-hewn Hergott dolls, adapted from an Amish practice) and too intimidating (the expanse of what reads like an athletic mat, covered in hard, protective plastic).



Diamond Stingily, Installation view of 'Doing the Best I Can,' 2019 at the Wattis Institute. (Courtesy of the artist; Queer Thoughts, New York; and Ramiken, New York; Photo: Johnna Arnold)

In the back gallery, Rosha Yaghmai's *Miraclegrow* shrinks the viewer even further still—to the size of a house spider traversing the artist's tiled bathroom floor.

These shifts in perspective are made possible by the fact that Stingily has newspapered over not just the street-facing windows, but the gallery skylights as well, eliminating all possible reference points to the outside world (and its relative scale).

Stingily was a child athlete in a family of athletes, but as she confesses in the exhibition brochure, not a fervently self-directed one. “I never cared too much about winning when I knew it as just a game,” she writes. Her art and words are a meditation on belonging (to a family, a team, an artistic community) and actively participating in that community. “We all want to be a part of something,” she writes.

Up close, the show’s trophies (which easily number over 1,000) tell stories of practicality and exclusion. Augmented plates reassign “most valuable player” and “first place” awards with phrases like “It was for the glory,” and “There is no getting out of this mess & this is to remind you.” An even closer look reveals trophies for lacrosse, field hockey, badminton and what could be either diving or gymnastics all read, “We didn’t have this sport where I was at.”



Rosha Yaghmai, Installation view of 'Miraclegrow,' 2019 at the Wattis Institute. (Courtesy of the artist and Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles; Photo: Johnna Arnold)

In Yaghmai’s spare installation, viewers walk across a celery-green “tiled” floor to inspect a giant twist of encrusted metal pipe (a clever stand-in for a shed hair). A normal-sized bug zapper sits nearby, threatening now that you’re the spider. And through a curved cylinder sticking out of the wall, a looping bit of sound and light transmits a recording of Yaghmai and her brother performing a Persian song about pursuing a new life (the ultimate altered state).

Yaghmai’s space—and the abstracted video—is about as legible as you’d expect the human world to be when viewed through eight eyes. And yet we haven’t passed through the Wattis’ newspapered doors and suddenly turned into arachnids. Of course not. Nor have we become young softball catchers—though some of us might once have been. But *Doing the Best I Can* and *Miraclegro* do offer (adult, human) viewers approximations of wholly different worldviews. And that’s, as curator Leila Grothe writes in Yaghmai’s exhibition brochure, a way of “physically inhabiting *the stranger*,” a way of shifting the line between what is and is not strange.



'Doing the Best I Can' and 'Miraclegro' are on view at the Wattis Institute in San Francisco through March 30, 2019. [Details here.](#)