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Review

A walk through Isabelle Cornaro's 'Landscape'

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Isabelle Cornaro's "Landscape" (2016) installation.

(Hannah Hoffman Gallery)

The classic Minimalist black box is made into an ambivalent stage set for the centerpiece of Isabelle Cornaro's cerebral exhibition. Titled "Landscape," the room-size installation is somewhere between a severe exposition of the sculptural limits of geometric abstraction and a refined department store display of luxury goods.

For the Paris-based artist's second show at Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Cornaro fills the main room with an orderly, harmonious, rationally articulated landscape -- specifically

classical French -- albeit reduced to its most basic elements. Seven carefully crafted boxes are made from fine Baltic birch painted in a smooth black acrylic.

The foreground box is a low platform, like a stage, while the background box is a tall, mute monolith, as if it had floated in from a science fiction movie. In between, the remainder come in assorted shapes and sizes, some surfaces covered in sheets of shiny, light-reflective brass. Several are pedestals for simple objects.

Dried fungus and a tree root are elegantly placed off-center on the low platform, evoking an exotic Japanese Zen garden. Nearby, a small Joseph Cornell-style shadow box sits empty of assemblage elements -- save for the fleeting interior shadows that its name describes. Some small-denomination coins and fragile jewelry chains are strewn atop a third black box, modest worldly possessions cast aside as if on a dresser top.

A bolt of golden velvet laid on the floor across the foreground precedes a vertical length of dark indigo velvet neatly folded over a tall box near the back. Gold and indigo are the colors worn by the monumental shepherdess in Nicolas Poussin's most famous classical French landscape. As with "Et in Arcadia Ego," death is always present in Cornaro's elegiac Minimalist paradise. But the sober aura of funeral shrouds melds with the tactile pleasure of sumptuous yard goods.

Mortality also takes material form in two very strange wall reliefs of cast rubber, each a still life of enigmatic objects, as well as in a pair of "drawings" made from human hair wound around thin sheets of painted wood. The wispy drawings are especially fine, trapped as they are inside crisp boxes of smoky plexiglass like flies in Minimalist amber.