

Home Art WOW! (that's amazing!): Rosa Nussbaum's "Horizonland"

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Rosa Nussbaum, "Untitled Sign (Horizonland)," welded steel, acrylic, LED light strips, MDF latex paint. Photo by Annelise Gelman.

By **Annelise Gelman**

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As its title suggests, Rosa Nussbaum's solo show "Horizonland" — [on view through June 6 at Women & Their Work](#) — is wide-ranging and fantastical. With textile, film, performance documentation, collage and sculpture, Nussbaum explores both art-making and alienation in a compelling blend of comedy and sincerity.

The car serves as the exhibition's central image, both for its ubiquitous American cultural symbolism, and for its personal resonance: [Nussbaum, born and raised in Europe](#), was unable to drive when she came to the United States, making the passenger seat's passivity a natural vantage point. The car is literally personified in one of the exhibit's most visually striking (and funniest) offerings. "Car" is a "performance sculpture" made from, as Nussbaum's label reads, "upholstery foam, fabric, wire, Furby, tissue paper, rubber, batting," and "performer." The car is effectively both a puppet and a costume, allowing Nussbaum to animate the helplessness of a passenger and to give voice to the vehicle itself.



Installation view of Rosa Nussbaum, "Car (performance sculpture)," upholstery foam, fabric, wire, Furby, tissue, paper, rubber, batting," 2019.

As a sculpture "Car" is a joy to look at from any angle, with surprising textures and colors spilling out of every corner, like a five-year-old's crayon-and-glitter drawing of a car (where is the engine? for that matter, *what* is the engine?) faithfully rendered in three dimensions. The performance documentation on view — a video of Nussbaum delivering an artist's statement from inside the car, as the car — is as much an experimental standup comedy set as it is a window into the artist's

background, inspirations, and personal and conceptual motivations. Yet the video manages to provide plenty of insight. As Nussbaum (or “Car”) says: “Horizonland” is about “what you look at and where you look from.”

In the role of “Car,” Nussbaum is goofy and apologetic, stumbling over herself; she oscillates from wise and sharp commentary about the importance of social connection to frantically searching for an enormous fabric driver’s license which is almost as large as the car itself. As entertaining as the video and props are, “Car” also has very real stakes: Nussbaum’s legal status in the United States is precarious, and her visa will expire this year on her birthday unless she’s able to renew it. By virtue of this precarity, Nussbaum’s work can’t help but reflect back on the perilous status and treatment of immigrants in the United States and the world over.



Rosa Nussbaum, “Car (drivers license),” 2019. Fabric and foam. Installation view at Women & Their Work. Photo by Annelise Gelman.

But the imagination and wit with which Nussbaum approaches the bureaucratic machinations of immigration procedures prevents her work from being overshadowed by its political resonances. This is most obvious in “Actions for an O Visa,” a two-minute audition reel in which Nussbaum greets the viewer with an “Oh hi! I’m an alien! Nice to meet you!” and then peppily advocates for her right to remain in the country, citing her “extraordinary abilities” (which may or may not actually qualify as extraordinary — or as abilities, for that matter).

Beyond her humor, one of the threads tying these works together is Nussbaum’s own voice. Whether the pieces center on autobiography, fantasy, wordless exclamations, or feature Nussbaum playing a public-access-television expert alongside her collaborator Kevin Brophy (“Rosa Nussbaum & Kevin Brophy’s Keeping Young & Living Longer: How to stay Active & Healthy post 100, or How to avoid Life Shortening Errors by Rosa Nussbaum & Kevin Brophy”), Nussbaum’s consistent narrative voice invites her audience to draw connections between her characters.

Rosa Nussbaum, "WOW (that's amazing) — blimp walk," performance, 2019.

Each of Nussbaum's personae register as a facet of the artist, rather than as wholly separate people, reinforcing the show's underlying themes of interdependence. Collectively, these works insist that people and their contexts co-create and co-determine each other. Nussbaum's humor allows her to explore very deep questions about being a person and speaking from a subject position, while still poking fun at the strategies (and complicated histories) that are enmeshed with these questions — particularly in an American academic setting. (Nussbaum is a recent graduate of the University of Texas's studio art MFA program.) In one short clip, Nietzsche is brought up and then immediately rejected with an "Ew!," and the suggestion of Heidegger is simply met with "The Nazi?" These references don't feel like insider winks; they feel like the honest response of an artist to a social context that often dictates (far more than artworks themselves) the terms through which we engage with and interpret art. Nussbaum escapes this trap by wryly insisting on new terms, speaking not as an artist but as a fitness instructor, an alien, an expert on aging and longevity, or, yes, a car.

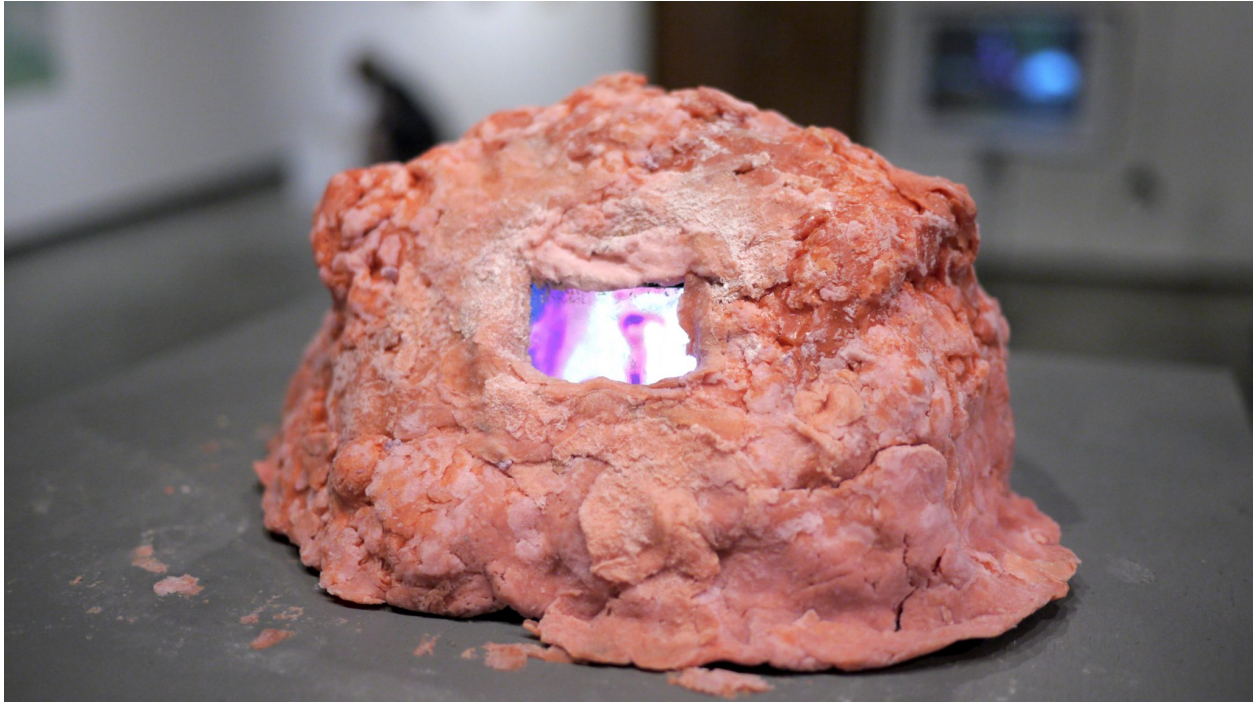


Rosa Nussbaum, "Untitled collages," 2019. Photo by Annelise Gelman.

I suspect Nussbaum's 2017 collages — recycled Renaissance paintings decorated with stickers of dinosaurs or Lisa Frank-style hearts — are the most divisive pieces in the show. If you're not on board with the exhibit's blend of high and low production values, sincerity and irreverence — and capaciousness — the collages might register as less worked-over versions of some of the other pieces on view. For me, though, they underscore the exhibit's unpretentiousness. I particularly loved the single collage hidden in a nook in an empty hallway at the back of the gallery, like an unused costume stored for safekeeping in a Disneyland alleyway.

The collages also provide a refreshing point of contrast with the other materials on offer, especially the tapestry "The Natural Bridge," which features cartoonish cloverleaf highway overpasses

rendered in woven pastels, an urban landscape besieged by flying chickens (dead, beheaded, still attached to their supermarket styrofoam platters) and giant penises enclosed in giant fists, ejaculating what could be either sperm or smoke.



Rosa Nussbaum, detail of “Agent Wonder (and the days of arbitration),” 2017. Steel, wood, paint gum, Raspberry Pi, speaker. Photo by Annelise Gelman.

“Horizonland” has many more surprises on offer. There’s a video embedded in a mound of bubblegum that can only be viewed while sitting a custom high-chair-cum-throne and tells an anaphoric story detailing the adventures of a character called Agent Wonder; a giant handmade sign; a comically oversized inflated blimp, painted with Nussbaum’s face (“WOW! [that’s amazing!]”). Each piece is worth lingering over, and while none of them privilege language over their visual (or olfactory) elements, Nussbaum is an extraordinary writer.

I’m reluctant to summarize it, but the outsider’s immigration narrative in the projector-based work “Horizonland” is undergirded by a remarkable poem, simultaneously straightforward and surreal. Nussbaum has a way of stating surprising-but-inevitable truths with a matter-of-factness that catches the listener off-guard.

But like any good theme park, visiting “Horizonland” is a wholly different (and much more enjoyable) experience from reading about it. This exhibit is the best I’ve seen this year. You should go while you still can, and while the United States is still lucky enough to welcome this artist.

*“Rosa Nussbaum: Horizonland” continues through June 6 at Women & Their Work. [At 1 p.m. June 1, join Nussbaum for “Performance: Car \(artist talk\).”](#)*