

KIA NEILL

TERRAIN



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

JANUARY 16 - FEBRUARY 27, 2010

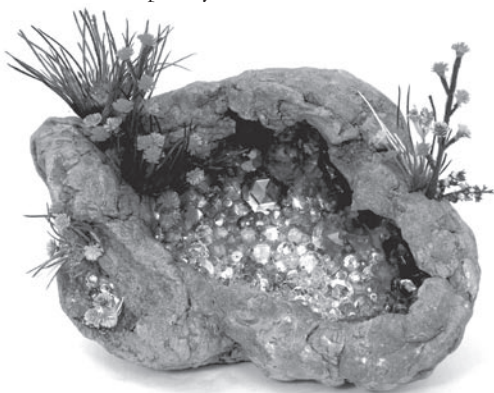
AUSTIN, TEXAS

KIA NEILL

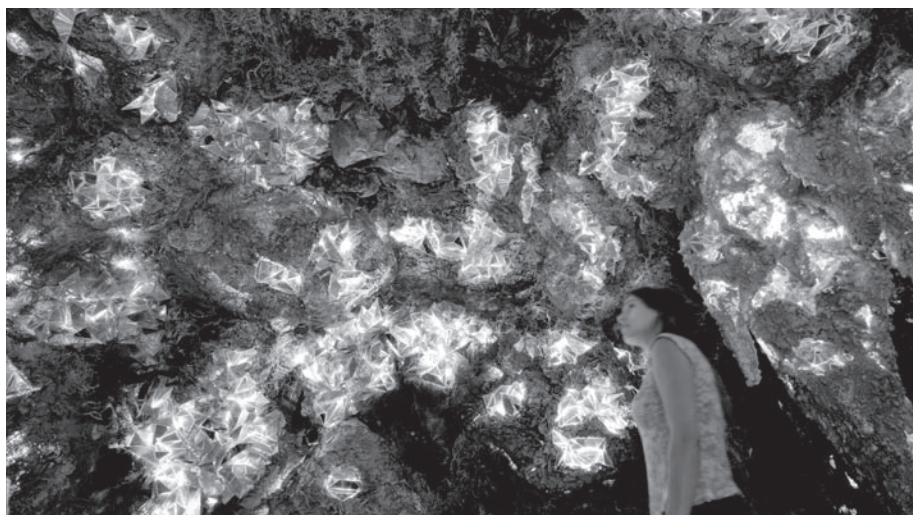
The Allure of the Artificial

It is easy to give in to Kia Neill's unabashedly fake caves, rocks, and landscapes. Constructed from materials commonly used to make domestic decorations, such as paper mache, Spanish moss, Christmas lights, rhinestones, and beads, her sculptures are obviously imitations, yet realistic enough to be believable as geological formations. Authenticity, artificiality, and seduction are mixed together to create an environment that is so wondrous, so beautiful, and superlative in so many ways that it is made to look not just real – but better than real. As you move from one sparkling detail to the next, it is easy to get lost in the work and forget that you are even in a gallery. Any skepticism about whether what you are looking at is truly natural melts away. The work is all out artificial and completely marvelous.

During one of her many shopping trips to a neighborhood craft store, Neill saw something that convinced her of the power of the counterfeit. She found a decorative apple made of styrofoam that had tiny bite marks in it where a child had tried to eat it. Did the kid actually believe it was a real apple? Or did the styrofoam fruit somehow lure them into a willful suspension of disbelief? Neill was fascinated by the idea that something could be so shamelessly synthetic and completely irresistible.



Geode, 2007. 7" h. 9" w. 7" deep. Foam, paper-mache, plaster, rhinestones, plastic flowers.



Detail of *Grotto*, 2009. 6' x 10' x 30', Chicken wire, paper-mache, lumber, plaster, paint, glitter, polyurethane foam, flocking fiber, Spanish moss, CDs, blinking colored lights, tinsel. Photo at the Lawndale Art Center.

Her installation at Women & Their Work, *Terrain*, is the latest in a series of illusionistic landscapes that she has sculpted over the past three years. Neill began working in this vein in 2007 with her small *Geode* sculpted out of paper mache and plaster. Its hollow center is filled with multicolored rhinestones, and tufts of plastic grasses and flowers fill its crannies and cracks. She thought of the work as a sort of souvenir, like you might find at a gift shop at a national park. Neill sees souvenirs of extraordinary geological formations, such as snow globes of Mammoth Cave, as “enhanced synthetic ideals” that amplify natural forms and landscapes with unnatural embellishments. The result is a view of nature that is spectacular, surreal, and gaudy. Neill embraces all these qualities and seeks to elaborate on them in her installations.

Her 2008 installation at DiverseWorks brought the aesthetic of *Geode* to a life-sized scale. In her *Cave*, one could literally walk into what appeared to be a jewel-encrusted cavern. The thirty-foot long installation was fabricated out of paper mache on a wooden armature and then covered with glowing crystals built from broken CDs and Christmas lights. Visitors to Neill's installation squeezed

through narrow passages of paper mache rocks and crouched under blinking constellations of crystals to wiggle their way from one end to the other.

Over the past three years, Neill has continued to replicate nature in both small sculptures and large installations, as precious dioramas and full-blown environments. *Wall Flora* is another small sculpture, posing as a rock, covered with gemstones, plastic plants, and a wide array of beads made to look like colored moss. It relates to *Alcove*, a large installation also covered in multicolored faux moss made from flocking fiber, polyurethane foam, Spanish moss, plaster, and paper mache. *Alcove* was originally mounted in the bay window of Box 13, a Houston artist collective where Neill currently has her studio. It was her first work to feature stalactites, which hung 3 to 6 feet down from the ceiling. Some stalactites from *Alcove* were reused in Neill's next installation, *Grotto*, which she built for her solo show at Lawndale Art Center. A maze of hanging “stone” formations heavily embellished with blinking crystals, *Grotto* was even more all-encompassing than *Alcove*. In this way, there was an organic growth from one installation

to the next, a process the artist has continued to follow in *Terrain*, which is built on sections from *Alcove* and *Grotto*.

Like her earlier work, *Terrain* is a full-scale elaboration on a smaller sculpture, *Quilt*. In 2009, the Houston Arts Alliance awarded Neill an individual artist grant, which she used to develop a new series of sewn sculptures. *Quilt* was made by sewing small concentric circles onto a single piece of multicolored velvet. The stitches distorted the cloth creating peaks and valleys that look like a hilly or mountainous landscape. From early on, the artist has been interested in craft techniques not only for their aesthetic but also their psychological effect. The repetitive movements needed to make crafts such as embroidery relaxes and focuses the mind. Neill has found that the meditation she practices while making craft objects allows her to access abstract forms in her subconscious, a process she has been exploring

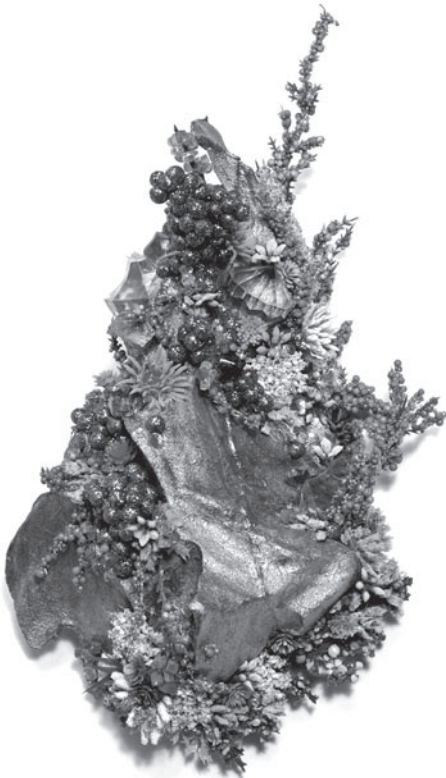
over the past few years in small-scale, abstract graphite drawings. She calls them “cartographic” as they not only map a mental landscape but also formally resemble caves, mountains, and bodies of water.

The “hills” and “valleys” of *Terrain* likewise result from Neill’s repetitive process of slowly building up layers of paper mache, burlap, paint, glitter, and CD crystals. Thus, it is a kind of map of her process and subconscious wanderings. As you walk on the path through *Terrain*, your mind is left to wander with the artist’s. There is no narrative or lesson to learn from looking at the landscape Neill has created. Instead, you can invent your own story about why this place looks the way it does, where it is, and what you are doing there. Moving through the space, you determine the order in which you see things and how you will remember the experience thereafter. Neill says that part of her art is the sculpture you see in front of you and

part is the “memory that sticks with you” after you have left the gallery. The lasting impression of her all-out artificial worlds is testament to the fact that authenticity has nothing on the power of blind belief, temptation, and imagination. In some ways, reality can never live up to what we can envisage. But like the kid in the craft store (and Eve), we are drawn to the apple and want to take a bite. Neill’s sculptures catch us right at that moment where we are about to sink our teeth in and suspends us in that feeling of rapture when we believe that everything is how we imagine it to be.

Rachel Hooper
Associate Curator
Blaffer Gallery, the Art Museum
of the University of Houston

*All quotes from interviews with
the artist, November 2009.*



Wall Flora, 2008. 9" h. 5" w. 3" deep.
Foam, rhinestones, plastic flowers.

KIA NEILL

Born in Chicago, Illinois, 1978.

EDUCATION

- 2005 M.F.A. The University of California, San Diego. San Diego, CA.
- 1999 B.F.A. The Columbus College of Art and Design. Columbus, OH.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2010 *Terrain*. Women & Their Work. Austin. TX.
- 2009 *Grotto*. Lawndale Art Center. Houston, TX.
- 2005 *Serving Buffalo Can Be Fun!* Graduate Gallery. UCSD. San Diego, CA.
- 2004 *In-home Mutations*. 1300 Gallery. Cleveland, OH.
- 2003 *Public Loaf*. Graduate Gallery. UCSD. San Diego, CA.
- 2001 *Inflatable Monster Feet*. Spark Art Space. Syracuse, NY.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2009 *Earth's Influence*. College of the Mainland Art Gallery. Texas City, TX.
- Topiary Text Lead*. 125 Gallery, Houston Art Alliance. Houston, TX.
- Cantanker Issue 8: Anxiety*. Pump Project, Austin, TX. Curator: Andrea Mellard.
- Enchantment*. Box13 Art Space. Houston, TX. Curator: Rachel L. Hooper.
- 2008 *Unboxed*. Crazywood Gallery. Huntsville, TX.
- Real Art World Residents*. DiverseWorks Artspace. Houston, TX.
- The Big Show*. Lawndale Art Center. Houston, TX. Curator: Aram Moshayedi.
- 2007 *The Hunting Art Prize Finalist Exhibition*. Houston, TX.

- Faculty Exhibition.* Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Glassell School of Art, Junior School. Houston, TX.
- 2006 *Recycled.* Limbo Fine Art Gallery. San Diego, CA.
Snapshots. ARC Gallery. Chicago, IL.
- 2005 *New Sculpture.* Guggenheim Gallery. Chapman University. Orange, CA. Curator: Richard Turner.
100 x 100. LAXART. Los Angeles, CA.
Greater Los Angeles Masters of Fine Art. California State University, Long Beach. Long Beach, CA.
Supersonic. LA Design Center. Los Angeles, CA.
Now Happening. University Art Gallery, University of California San Diego. San Diego, CA.
- 2004 *Shift.* Acuna-Hansen. Los Angeles, CA.
Paradigm Promiscuity Proliferation Perversion. Marcuse Gallery. UCSD. San Diego, CA.
- 2003 *Small Works.* The Muse Gallery. San Diego, CA.
Unconditional Cake. Marcuse Gallery. UCSD. San Diego, CA.
Art Boat. Garden Fresh. Chicago, IL. Curator: Jeremiah Ketner.
The 9th Floor. UCSD Graduate Exhibition. Hollywood, CA.
Homeland Security. 450 Broadway Gallery. New York, NY.
- 2002 *No Painting On Painting.* Marcuse Gallery. UCSD. San Diego, CA.
My Mindless Oh Mindless OH. Spark Art Space. Syracuse, NY. Curator: Jeff S. Williams.
- 2001 *The Foot Long Show.* The Zoid Gallery. Syracuse, NY.
Open to the General Public. Blue Cube Gallery. Columbus, OH.
Erotica. Sara Coyne Gallery. Syracuse, NY.
The Faux Show. Hall Walls Gallery. Buffalo, NY.
At Play. T.H.I.N.C. Gallery. Syracuse, NY.
National Small Works Exhibition. Schoharie County Arts Council Gallery. Cobleskill, NY. Curator: David Beitzel.
Small Sculpture 2001. National Society of Arts and Letters, at The Lakeview Museum. Peoria, IL.
- 2000 *Chicago Art Open.* Chicago Artists' Coalition, at The Art Institute of Chicago Graduate Gallery. Chicago, IL.
Painting, Drawing, Assemblage 2000. Eye Five Gallery. Los Angeles, CA. Curator: Jill D'Agnew.
Diversity in the Arts. Syracuse University, Schaffer Galleries. Syracuse, NY.
Diekasehause Group Show. Spark Art Space. Syracuse, NY.
One World. Gallery 9. Cleveland, OH.
The Columbus College of Art and Design Alumni. Roy G. Biv Gallery. Columbus, OH.
13th Annual McNeese National Works on Paper. McNeese University. Curator: Terrie Sultan.

What is Drawing Now? Weber State University. Ogden, UT. Curator: Jane Fudge.

New American Talent: The Fifteenth Exhibition. Arthouse (Texas Fine Art Association). Curator: David Pagel.

SELECTED RESIDENCIES & AWARDS

- 2009 *Individual Artist Grant.* Houston Art Alliance. Houston, TX.
- 2008 DiverseWorks Summer Residency. *The Real Art World.* Houston, TX.
- 2004 *Humanities Fellowship.* The University of California, San Diego.
- 2000 Johannstädter Kultutreff Residency. *Fourth International Ceramic-Project.* Dresden, Germany.

SELECTED PRESS & PRESENTATIONS

- 2009 Press. Troy Schulz. *Space Invasion.* Houston Press, Dec. 10-16, 2009. p.32.
Press. Christina Wiginton, Modern Luxury Magazine, Nov. Issue. Houston, TX.
Radio Interview. *Front Row*, KUHF Radio. Aug. 10. Houston, TX.
Exhibition Catalog. *Anxiety.* Cantanker Magazine Issue 8. Juror: Andrea Mellard.
- 2008 Presentation. *Meet the Real Art World.* DiverseWorks Artspace. Houston, TX.
- 2007 Presentation. *Slide Jam!* Contemporary Art Museum of Houston. Houston, TX.
- 2006 Press. *Oh Give me a Home: Recent Work by Kia Neill.* Cindy Moore, Ducts.org, Spring.
- 2005 Press. *Affordable art? Right this way.* Scott Timberg, LA Times, calenderlive.com, Aug. 25.
- 2004 Press. *In Transition.* Holly Myers, LA Times, August 20, pg.E28.
- 2003 Press. *Homeland Security, Artists Chat.* Aaron Zimmerman, NY Arts/ Berliner Kunst, Vol.8 #3, pg. 55.



Detail of *Grotto*, 2009. 6' x 10' x 30', Chicken wire, paper-mache, lumber, plaster, paint, glitter, polyurethane foam, flocking fiber, Spanish moss, CDs, blinking colored lights, tinsel. Photo at the Lawndale Art Center.



Top: Detail of *Wall Flora*, 2008. 9" h. 5" w. 3" deep. Foam, rhinestones, plastic flowers.

Bottom: Detail of *Quilt*, 2009. 3" h. 21" w. 21" deep. Velvet, thread, flocking fiber.

Cover Panel: Detail of *Grotto*, 2009. 6' x 10' x 30', Chicken wire, paper-mache, lumber, plaster, paint, glitter, polyurethane foam, flocking fiber, Spanish moss, CDs, blinking colored lights, tinsel. Photo at the Lawndale Art Center.



Detail of *Grotto*, 2009. Approx. 6' h. 10' w. 30' deep.

Chicken wire, paper-mache, lumber, plaster, paint, glitter, polyurethane foam, flocking fiber, Spanish moss, CDs, blinking colored lights, tinsel.

Women & Their Work

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Known for its pioneering spirit, embrace of artistic innovation, and commitment to Texas audiences and artists, Women & Their Work is now celebrating its 31st anniversary. Presenting over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film, the gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,844 artists in 261 visual art exhibitions, 111 music, dance, and theater events, 14 film festivals, 22 literary readings, and 394 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, ArtForum and on National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from

the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 1,800 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



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Photos by Eric Hester.

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