



Culture Monster

ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

Art review: Chris Doyle at Sam Lee Gallery



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If a digitally animated tree falls in a video forest, the sound it makes in Chris Doyle's "Waste Generation" is the low moan of money-driven ecological degradation.

The New York-based artist's second solo show at Sam Lee Gallery centers on a 6½-minute projected video animation that turns Thomas Cole's

series of five apocalyptic paintings, "The Course of Empire" (1833-36) into a meditation on contemporary collapse. Doyle wraps the grim narrative in the bright, flat colors of a cartoon, cloaking Cole's pastoral mythology of society's rise and fall into a fully technological mantle.

"'Tis but the same rehearsal of the past," wrote Lord Byron, on whose "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" Cole partly based his series. "First freedom and then Glory -- when that fails, wealth, vice, corruption -- barbarism at last."

So it goes with Doyle's tale, in which junk piles, factory fumes and cascades of cash are periodically overtaken by shoots of organic growth, pushing up from the industrial mulch. They blossom into a forest primeval, only to morph again into kaleidoscopic visions of the engraved laurel and acanthus leaves and Baroque webs that decorate bank notes and dollar bills.

Doyle avoids the melodrama that can make Cole's painting-cycle a bit hard to take. (The video's electronic soundtrack is somber and elegiac.) His stylistic repertoire is also beguiling and smart, adapting the Fortune-magazine sleekness of Roaring '20s and Depression-era Precisionist paintings, Steven Spielberg's cinematic suburbanism, the luxurious carpet designs of Middle Eastern oil sheikdoms and more.

Stills from the video are also shown in light-boxes whose proportions echo currency. "Waste Generation" is less indictment than mirror, and its historical references add resonant depth.

Sam Lee Gallery, 990 N. Hill St., Chinatown, (323) 227-0275, through April 9. Closed Sun.-Tue.