

## ***Distant Viridian Crush***

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It's a curious, ambiguous phrase, *Distant Viridian Crush*. One might imagine a lovesick aphid's unrequited affection for an aloof stalk of milkweed, or perhaps a post-human future where populations of tenacious plant species—having survived climate collapse, nuclear winter, and protracted drought—explode in number, overwhelming and devouring the disintegrating ruins of industrial civilization.

*Distant Viridian Crush* points at scale: size, space, and time, each of which is relative—a single pollinating season; the (contested) temporal arc of the Anthropocene; vast geologic epochs; the gravitational dilation of time in outer space.

Such ecological, dimensional, and existential quandaries reverberate out from Claire Ashley's fluorescent-accented installations of homespun inflatables. The lumpy orbs are imposing, like the campy amoeboid extraterrestrial Blob, but simultaneously cartoonish, recalling Kirby, the friendly pink Nintendo alien. Suspended from ceilings, affixed to walls, or piled into corners, Ashley's airy entities swell to float, or sag into states of repose, their adherence to Earth's laws of gravity unclear. Wandering between what resemble impossibly airborne jellyfish, cellular egg sacs, or plasmatic wormhole expulsions, visitors encounter an exciting hybrid world both cryptic and slapstick. Scale gets weird. Is Ashley microscoping us into the nuclear, or telescoping us out to the interstellar?

There is a slipperiness here, an ambiguity, that would conjure the horrific half of the sublime were it not for Ashley's inviting, pulpy deployment of brilliant Day-Glo and rainbow paints. And so, in place of an event horizon, or the splitting of uranium-235, the bulbous balloons envelop viewers in a warm bath of 1980s and 90s kitsch: Hypercolor t-shirts, Magic Eye posters, three-dimensional Trapper Keeper landscapes, and laser tag birthday parties. Ashley's work thereby subverts the metrics of taste as much as it does assumptions about scale. Self-serious white cube curators typically abhor the cloying chromatics of Lisa Frank and midway cotton candy booths. In consistently incorporating populist palettes, Ashley bites her thumb at—and widens the potential cultural accessibility of—the contemporary art exhibition space.

If the recent history of monumental sculpture is a profuse, elitist, and masculine one, the objects in *Distant Viridian Crush* provide an effervescent and temporary antidote. When this show closes, Ashley, as she has done countless times before, will deflate her enormous sculptures, fold them down carefully like tents, and pack them into suitcases that might stack in the back of a minivan, or slide easily into the overhead compartment in economy. And then, scrappy props in tow, Ashley will be off to the next gig in a new town, like some Dada-drenched cross between PT Barnum and Gilda Radner, ready to unfurl buoyant bags of neon eye candy upon new audiences. Visitors young and old will marvel at the otherworldly anatomies drifting before their eyes. Some will read these oddities as exaggerated nanoscopes. Others will see them as miniaturized far-flung solar systems. They'll both be right.

Scottish-born, but based in Chicago since 1993, Ashley is an experienced champion of a patently Midwestern artistic mindset, unapologetically commingling DIY technical and material ingenuity with a leviathan levity and an egalitarian ethos. The result is an approachable, eye-popping brand of low-budget but boisterous extravaganzas that contend earnestly with ecologies and infinities by centering the unfussy aesthetic interests of everyday people (rather than the cultural intelligentsia). *Distant Viridian Crush* advances Ashley's mission—whether it's one to Mars or the mitochondrion—to unfold and inflate her flat-pack wares into what might best be described as coach class spectacles. In an era of toothless, for-profit selfie museums, *Distant Viridian Crush* offers an alternative experience economy, one that's freer, slower, and a whole lot stranger.