

ART IN BRIEF

EMI AVORA/JULIA KUNIN: Against Nature

Greenberg Van Doren Gallery

Taking its title from Joris-Karl Huysmans's Symbolist novel "À Rebours," this show brings together a Greek painter from London and an American sculptor in ceramics who are united in their predilection for opulence.

Julia Kunin's sculptures are essays in encrustation. They bring to mind the early ceramic works of Lucio Fontana in their gaudy voluptuousness. Given the literary cue, they could also be made to relate to Huysmans's antihero Des Esseintes's pet tortoise, whose shell is so heavily decorated with jewels that the poor creature expires. But actually, for all their extremity and overload, these essentially abstract sculptures seem credible as forms one could discover in nature — coral reefs, for instance. They entice more than they repel, and invite the eye to linger within their crevices or across their chromatically and texturally complex surfaces. "Pleasure Garden" (2007) has a grotesquerie familiar from

Rococo gardens. But there are also overtones of Chinese scholars' rocks.

Emi Avora's big, raucous canvases are theatrical and fantastic. In "No End" (2007), an absurd excess of staircases meet and meld into one another, making them virtually impossible to use. "Green Deco" (2006) describes an enormous multi-storied atrium with crisscrossing escalators, a seedy casino as if conceived by Piranesi.

The true decadence these artists share — Huysmans aside — has to do with the way they combine whimsy and heaviness, but they do so differently. Ms. Kunin's sculptures are busy and frilly, but they manage to come off as fresh and lively all the same. Ms. Avora's paintings offer a more complex good-bad dynamic. The paintings exude a bright, cheery energy, but at the same time her brushstrokes and the lines they describe seem knowingly leaden, a bit like a Bernard Buffet. Where Ms. Kunin's craft spills out, Ms. Avora's canny cackhandedness claws back just as it draws you in.

David Cohen

Until June 22 (730 Fifth Ave. at 57th Street, 212-445-0444).



GREENBERG VAN DOREN GALLERY

Emi Avora, 'No End' (2007).