

# Critic's Choice Sex, death and beyond: A surreal ride through the dreamland of Katie Grinnan at LAXArt



Katie Grinnan, "Enter-Face," 2012-15, mixed media, at LAXArt.

(Michael Underwood)

By **David Pagel**

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**“S**urreal” has become the go-to adjective of the moment, describing everything from traffic accidents to perfectly pitched baseball games.

The original Surrealists, including Andre Breton, Max Ernst and Salvador Dali, would be appalled — both because their focus on the subversive nature of dreams had been diluted and because their groundbreaking works no longer proposed an alternative to business as usual.

If those same Surrealists happened to visit Katie Grinnan’s exhibition at LAXArt, smiles might break across their faces. They’d be happy to see a contemporary artist probing the mysterious landscape of dreams — in a way that returns the rebellious charge to the exploration of the unconscious.

“I Dreamt I Stole an Elevator in a Shopping Mall” consists of two terrific sculptures. Each focuses not on the content of dreams — sex, death and anxiety, as well as pleasure, terror and whatever other stories our brains tell us when we sleep — but instead on the structure of dreams, on the ways they work, on the manners in which they are formatted. Neither a storyteller nor a tale spinner, Grinnan is a Structural Surrealist.

The centerpiece, “Enter-Face,” is a constellation of found and hand-crafted objects, many on spindly, three-legged armatures. Clustered in the center of the main gallery, it includes three woven rugs, three automobile headrests (complete with monitors on which three short videos play), inflated floatation devices, toy-size train tracks and train cars, rubber lizards, flowerpots, cinder blocks, urethane rocks, the five-ringed Olympic symbol (gone all wobbly, like the clocks in Dali’s painting) and a sequence of images, printed on plastic, depicting a blue polar bear.

That’s the tip of the iceberg, in terms of the materials Grinnan has composed and the stories visitors must make up to make sense of the everything-plus-the-kitchen-sink ethos of her work. All of the objects come from dreams she has had since childhood, but her sculpture is not autobiographical. Like Jim Shaw, who also mines his dreamlife for its connections, Grinnan turns her dreams into a springboard for conversation, otherwise known as social discourse.

“Enter-Face” is a piecemeal, patchwork, ad hoc roller coaster. Play, not work, is its focus. Leaps of the imagination, not step-by-step argumentation, are what it invites and inspires. Circuitous, loop-the-loop movements, multiple layerings and off-the-beaten path discoveries are its point and modus operandi.

“Nocturnal Hologram” similarly uses simple materials and processes to model the mechanic of dreams, all the better to convey the mystery that lives within them. Spawned from images in “Enter-Face,” the five-layer, wormhole-riddled figurative sculpture conflates planes and spaces to reveal that rationality maps only a small slice of consciousness. There’s lots more to discover.

**LAXArt**, 7000 Santa Monica Blvd., Los Angeles, (323) 871-4140, through March 26. Closed Sundays and Mondays. [www.laxart.org](http://www.laxart.org)

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