

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Three Solo Shows Reshape a Single Museum

by [Blair Schulman](#) on September 17, 2015



Installation view, 'Amir H. Fallah: The Caretaker' at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art (all photos by EG Schempf)

OVERLAND PARK, Kan. — At the [Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art](#), three solo exhibitions by Mark Cowardin, Amir H. Fallah, and Rodolfo Marron III are linked by their scrutiny of earthly and spiritual environments. In parts, they all display a heavy-handedness towards object-making, but they also succeed in initiating intelligent conversations.

The Caretaker is [Amir H. Fallah](#)'s quasi-claustrophobic pastiche of patterns and colors recreating the basement of a local journalism professor's home. The subject's cactus collection and his grandmother's needlepoint pillows are incorporated by Fallah to demonstrate how we portray ourselves through symbols and objects. The walls of the gallery are a dark, almost cobalt, blue, while bright orange extension cords, draped haphazardly, help power grow lights for the cacti and give the space a trippy, subterranean aura. They lay the foundation for the entire display — your eyes are drawn first to the bright orange, which then leads you to the objects and Fallah's paintings.



Installation view, 'Amir H. Fallah: The Caretaker' at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art

These canvases depict amorphous shapes which appear to the eye as patterned shrouds, raising the question of whether they're human or sculptural figures. Except for the different colors and patterns, the shapes are indistinguishable from one another, like a group of ghostly apparitions. They evoke the human need to veil or costume ourselves with objects and materials, wearing adornments so that we are perceived as we wish to be instead of presenting ourselves as we really are.



Installation view, 'Amir H. Fallah: The Caretaker' at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art (click to enlarge)

In tandem with these ideas, Fallah repurposes a group of 1980s-era, garish **Coogi sweaters** from the subject's father, transforming them into a giant wall mural. I got the sense that the artist couldn't resist the opportunity to use these brightly patterned fabrics. He made a good choice in concept and composition, but the question lingered for me: did he create the installation because of a genuine

interest in these sweaters, in all their tacky glory, or was it a solution to fill a large wall? Did Fallah see a connection with the rest of his installation, or was he just intrigued by the sweaters' bold palettes (and hoped the connection would follow)? It's a great-looking object, but the materials are so spot-on trendy that its nod to hipster cool is more than a little obvious.

"Hex Lamp," meanwhile, is an encapsulation of everything in the installation, presented in a compact, sealed environment. More cacti, sand, and additional household items are housed within a large vitrine — an enormous diorama that soars to nearly the height of the space. "Hex Lamp" seems like an effort at safekeeping, a kind of microcosm of the installation, which is in itself a microcosm of the actual basement space. It reflects Fallah's efforts to choreograph and control the audience's experience.



Installation view, 'Mark Cowardin: The Space Between' at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art

Nearby, [Mark Cowardin's](#) *The Space Between* fills a gallery with blinding white light. Its central installation, and the title piece, comprises long fluorescent tubes suspended from the ceiling that seem to flow through a hollowed out tree trunk–like sculpture, eventually resting on the floor and still glowing brightly. The motion and power of the lights and their downward direction make it appear as though Zeus himself were throwing lightning bolts from the sky, damning us all. "The Space Between" is cold and brutal. The amount of energy it expends — all that artificial brightness passing through a naturalistic structure — makes for a condemnation of our overconsumption of resources to keep pace with a growing global population.

One might see a reference to the neon works of Bruce Nauman here, but the figuration of the tree trunk is exclusively Cowardin. The bulbs also hark back to Fallah's installation, which uses electric

lights and extension cords promiscuously. I could feel a slow resentment creeping in over that wasteful atmosphere of high-wattage lamps, just to keep all those cacti thriving.



Installation view, 'Mark Cowardin: The Space Between' at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art (click to enlarge)

Intended to compliment these ideas, Cowardin's *Cloud Group (#1–#13)* is a series of sculptures resembling vertical clouds billowing smoke. Placed on utilitarian, artist-built shelves, each piece has tiny bulbs inserted throughout, some painted over in gold, others flickering like holiday decorations. On the whole, the *Cloud Group* sculptures are clunky in appearance and not crafted with the same finesse as "The Space Between." They have a cartoonish quality that detracts from the central piece of the installation. I can see how their inclusion offers an additional comment on manmade energy consumption, but ultimately they distract from and overburden an already sleek, smart, and powerful piece.

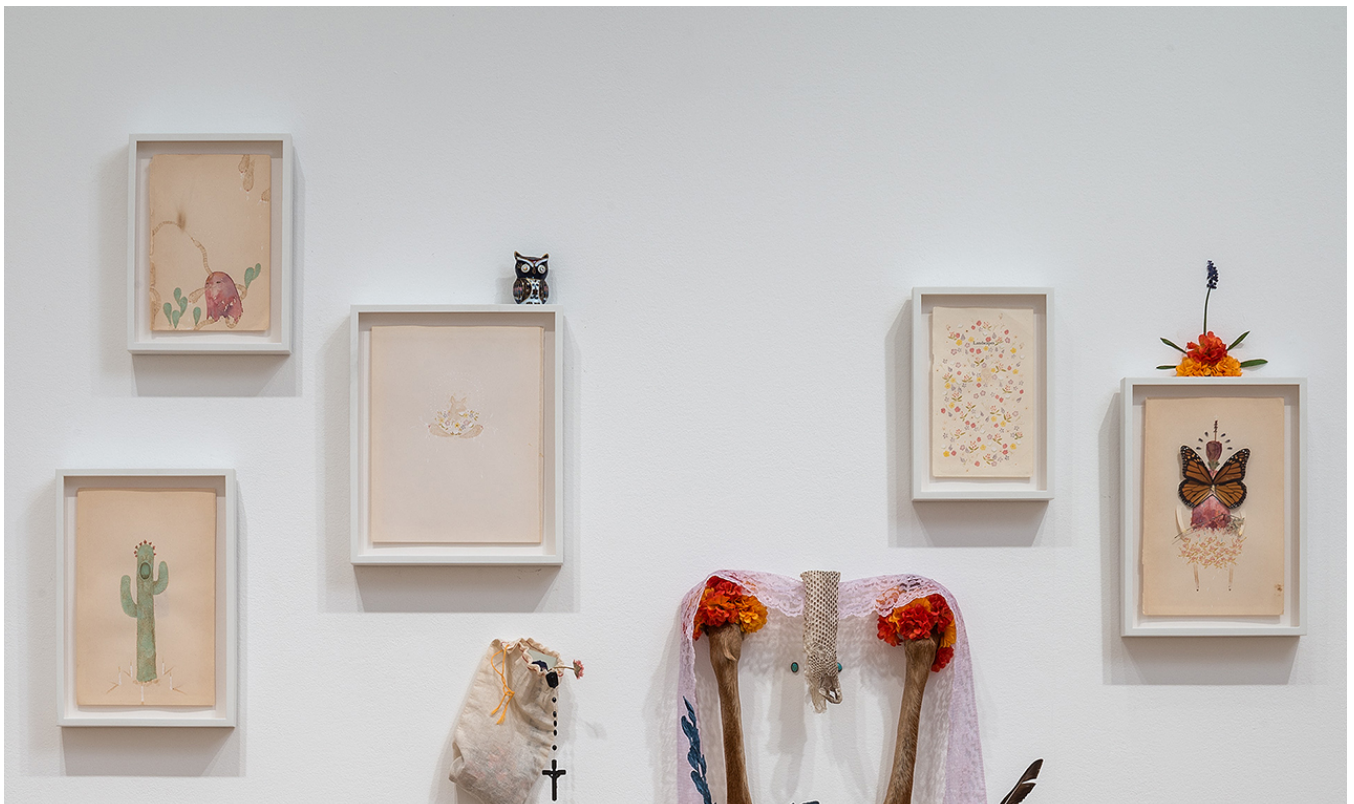
Rodolfo Marron III's *A Poke Ghost and the Garden of Tearz* resonates with Cowardin's installation by representing a turn away from that same type of consumption. The show features Marron's drawings and paintings hung above small altars that invoke a gentle spirituality. Birds' nests, thistles, dried flowers, taxidermy and toy deer, and crocheted doilies are presented as objects of symbolism derived from several liturgies, including Catholicism, Dia de Muertos, and Peyotism.



Installation view, 'Rodolfo Marron III: A Poke Ghost and the Garden of Tearz' at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art (click to enlarge)

The materials here include pressed flowers ("Flowers for the Ones I Love") as well as drawings of floral patterns made from bilberries, hibiscus, and butterfly ink, all done on paper taken from books found at the thrift store. Their small, similar size gives the drawings the appearance of intimate recollections from a diary. You can see that great care has been taken to ensure that lines and other markings are given the right amount of precision and fragility. Their gentleness is almost too precious.

One of the most thoughtful pieces is "My Dearest Friend, You'll Soon Begin To Love Again," made in loving memory of Ella, a deer that resided on the grounds of Kansas City's Elmwood Cemetery. A soothing presence to mourners, Ella was shot and killed in 2013 by a rifle-toting individual with no concept of her role at the cemetery. Using taxidermied hooves, Marron invokes her loss and importance to Kansas City and helps the audience imagine her as a spiritual icon rooted within Kansas City history. I was moved.





Installation view, 'Rodolfo Marron III: A Poke Ghost and the Garden of Tearz' at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art (click to enlarge)

Each of these exhibitions at the Nerman benefits from a philosophical approach. Marron embraces the spiritual world for guidance and enlightenment; Fallah forces nature upon us by bringing it into our homes, regulating light and texture to re-create hybrid organic environments; and Cowardin's work critiques energy consumption as a salve for our needs, regardless of how this might affect the world in which we live. There is introspection and reflection to be found in everything here, if one is willing to take a moment to follow the paths laid out by these artists.

Mark Cowardin: *The Space Between*, Amir H. Fallah: *The Caretaker*, and Rodolfo Marron III: *A Poke Ghost and the Garden of Tearz* all continue at the [Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art](#) (Johnson County Community College, 12345 College Boulevard, Overland Park, Kansas) through September 27.

Amir H. Fallah**Mark Cowardin****Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art****Rodolfo Marron III**