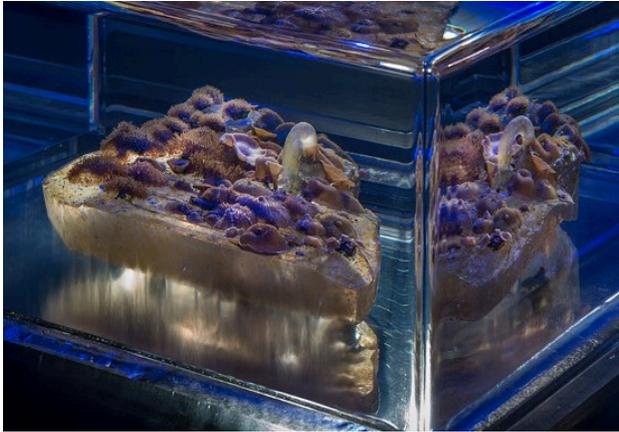


The Pitch

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Glenn Kaino parks his dazzling Tank at Grand Arts

Tracy Abeln
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Billy Clubs. X-Lunar Destroyer. Time Machines and Poker Chips and Lava Rain. Reverse Gorilla Nipples. Ultimate Warrior and Tickle Me Pink. Albino Blizzard Zoa and Utter Chaos. Also: Space Monsters, Long Lash Angel, Taylor's Holy Grail, Rastas, Wham'n Watermelon, Chameleon People Charmer, Baby Got Back, Sexy Crickets, Lanthanide Star, Arctic Ice, Slimeria, the Shiznit, 5-Colors Rainbow, and Chief Wiggum. The list sounds like a roundup of party DJs or the hot sellers at a Colorado marijuana dispensary, but it is in fact a roll of the popular names given to coral varieties. Coral cultivation is an insiders' world, with its own terminology and plenty of online magazines, message boards, and places to buy new polyps (baby coral), nutritional products and accessories.

Glenn Kaino has brought this fancy world to us, a few blocks from Kansas City's Sea Life Aquarium (and minus an admission fee), in Grand Arts' penultimate exhibition, Tank.

The space's main gallery is set up in what looked to me like a living room, one dotted with 10 very specialized coffee tables. Classically styled solid bases support sparkling acrylic zero-edge aquariums. The clear water within flows continuously up over the top and slides beautifully down into the channel surrounding the tanks on all four sides. The process is flawless and itself mesmerizing. The presentation allows for a variety of optical illusions, double-vision perspectives or outright clear overhead views of the stars of the show: the coral colonies, in all their flowing, neon-glowing glory. (Stooping over these waist-high presentations is a bit awkward, but the vibrant creatures invite long inspection; it would have been obtrusive but helpful to have had something to sit on.)

Tank was first staged at Prospect.3 in New Orleans last fall, and the press images from that venue show a space cluttered with machinery: the 800-gallon "life support system" necessary to keep these micro environments alive and connected to one another. Grand Arts' presentation on its home turf surpasses what it was able to do at Prospect.3; here, the reservoirs, filtering systems and PVC connections are in the building's basement. There is nothing to distract — no music, nothing on the walls, not even any cards describing what particular kinds of coral are grouped in each tank.

In the back room is a wall of nine large LED screens, showing a sketch for Power Soften (Kaino in collaboration with Yacht and Dr. Pim Bongaerts). Closeup images of coral colonies in action, with their feeding tentacles emerging and retracting, blink on and off the grid, alternating with aerial shots of waves hitting beaches and with those terrifically funky names for coral species flashing on the screens. It's a riot of color tucked into a larger riot of color, though, like the rest of Tank, its engagement doesn't always outpace your thirst for context or for more about these creatures.

Species information is stashed in a binder near the entrance; should anyone care to geek out on the particulars of coral culture, the opportunity is there. It's in these materials, for instance, that you learn about some coral being more aggressive than other coral, and that the nature of their territorial battles is part of what attracted Kaino to them.

Another reason for Kaino's production here, of course, is to draw attention to the coral's fragility, though the topic of environmental degradation is implied more than stated expressly. His artist's statement explains that he's more interested in the parallels between corals battling one another and human warfare. The name of the project isn't just a play on the vessels that hold Kaino's sea creatures; it alludes also to a U.S. government program, Reef-Ex, that strategically dumps defunct military hardware into coastal waters to provide coral colonies new places to grow. (We do this with old subway trains, too, but tanks provide a better metaphor.)

The chunks of actual M-60 tanks that were used to make translucent resin casts, which serve as platforms for Kaino's coral to live on in their pretty tank-tables, are eerie industrial forms. A large, gearlike wheel is almost like a snowflake; differently colored corals occupy their respective branches. Another platform has an intriguing loop at the top. One has curious, boltlike projections and looks like a big electrical plug. And one of the messages you take away from staring at them is that, good intentions notwithstanding, we've made other species live among (or perish because of) our waste. The destiny of these coral colonies as they stand may be as tenuous as the threatened reefs of our acidifying oceans.

The complexity of this installation and the number of partners required to pull it off — a team including biologists, researchers and engineers at a number of institutions — is impressive. Grand Arts has long been in the business of grand-scale achievements — sometimes stirring up argument over whether such undertakings are art in the first place.

So it's fitting that one of the space's final shows was three years in the making. A lot of work has gone into bringing these mini reefs to us in the Midwest, including careful husbandry and tenacious technical stewardship, and it would be a mistake to shrug it off with "This isn't art." The fact that the gallery is about to make itself extinct only underscores the message of this beautiful installation. The arrangement of colors, textures and shapes in Tank — so pleasing and educational (if you make a little effort to read up afterward) — is ultimately as fleeting as art, life and the Earth itself.