ARTFORUM

Meg Webster

PAULA COOPER GALLERY | 534 WEST 21ST STREET 534 West 21st Street May 7-June 24

Meg Webster's Solar Grow Room (all works cited, 2016) centers greenery—lettuces, herbs, and assorted blooms—under LED grow lights that are powered by solar panels affixed to the gallery's exterior. Equipment and edibles join in a self-sustaining (and sustainable) system that commutes between natural and electronic forms of energy. Disposed in nondescript planters, leaves and stems swell upward toward the lights in arrangements that suggest traditional still-life paintings, where botany often traffics in complex allegories of transience and decay. Yet Webster's take is less downbeat than pumped up. The LEDs' spectrum of syrupy reds and synthetic cyans lends the growth a vaguely lunar gleam, yielding the impression that the plants are fluorescing. Sheathed in Mylar, the walls amplify the lights' effects. Space and skin emerge in hi-fi hues that loosen the installation's claim on the organic. Animated by a power adapter's low-level buzz, this is a radioactive landscape.



Meg Webster, Solar Grow Room, 2016, 4 raised wooden planters with grass, flowers, and other vegetation, off-grid solar-powered electrical system, grow lights, Mylar-covered walls, dimensions variable.

Considered after *Solar Grow Room*, the show's remaining works, arranged in the gallery's main room, present something of a non sequitur. An ovoid mound of salt, a rectangular crop of moss, and a circular tangle of twigs indulge in a poetics of materials that implicates mythologies of mother earth (as evidenced in the title of the first piece, *Mother Mound Salt*, whose contour Webster has compared to a pregnant belly). One wishes that Webster had lingered in *Solar Grow Room*'s uneasy hyphenations of nature, machines, and informatics. Instead, the trio prospects an escape from technology. Unaltered organic materials here claim a sort of utopian immediacy, exemplified by the bosky smell of peat. The results recall Carl Andre's definition of sculpture as "matter mattering" and Donald Judd's assertion of three dimensions as "real space." At once naturalizing technology and technologizing nature, Webster's *Solar Grow Room* begs the question of whether such spaces, "real" or otherwise, are still available.

— Courtney Fiske

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