

## Ballet from Backstage

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### Susan Aurinko, "Exquisite Pain," at Finestra Art Space

Those of us who pay attention to names within the local art scene know Susan Aurinko as a gallerist (she ran the now defunct Flatfile Gallery) and a photographer. Aurinko's world, the one to which she has chosen to dedicate her career, is one that is neatly archived in drawers or framed and hung on walls. It's a two-dimensional world, and it seems to suit her.

It's all the more interesting, then, to see what happens when a photographer explores three-dimensional visual art. Aurinko isn't generally regarded as an installation artist, though it's not completely uncharted territory. Most of her work is black-and-white photography: Hard-lined compositions and themes of abstraction are played out, seldom interrupted by people.

It'd be easy to presume that Aurinko is rather detached from human emotion, having used concrete and daylight as her models more often than people. But all that's a wash once you've experienced "Exquisite Pain."

This ballet-theme photography and installation exhibit opened the first weekend of January in the Finestra Art Space in the Fine Arts Building. For those who've never been, it's a tiny space: a corner gallery with two walls made of windows, not exactly conducive to hanging art. Instead, Finestra flourishes with installations. Which means Aurinko had to put down the camera for a spell.

Instead, she sewed. She crafted. She clipped toenails. No joke: There's a little vial of toenail clippings encased, museum-style, in a sealed box. The title of the work? "Never too short."

For Aurinko, exposing the various physical and emotional pressures on ballet dancers has been something she's wanted to do for ages. Those toenail clippings? She's been collecting them for more than two years specifically for this project. The rest of it -- a ballerina's tutu constructed from pink seamstress' measuring tape, a pair of toe-shoes filled with razor-sharp shards of glass and mirror, bedazzled little bottles of pills lined neatly atop a coke mirror -- has been corked up much longer.

Aurinko is more than familiar with the side-effects that ballet has on its practitioners. Her daughters, now adults, were both ballerinas in their youth. The body image issues, the substance use and abuse, the bound feet, all of it hit close to home for Aurinko. "I watched this all happening, even to my own daughters," she said in a recent telephone call. "It just kept eating at me, and I just kept picking up my sketchpad."

While the resulting art could have easily come off as too personal or precious, instead it's eye-opening. "Perfect Specimens" is a framed and hung collection of miniature photographs of ballerinas pinned in a cotton display box atop images of butterfly wings, branded with Latin categorical names. "Blood, Sweat and Tears" is self-explanatory: Aurinko's gilded bottles of saline and real blood sit pretty atop a satin box. It's all quite telling, especially coming from a mother.

There are photographs here, too, but I wish there weren't. Too-small stills shot during performances of "Swan Lake," "The Nutcracker" and other ballet standards are tacked to the walls, some of them featuring Aurinko's daughters. Their poses are truly exquisite, muscles and bones held still in perfect poise. But as Aurinko proves in spades with this installation, it's what happens after the curtain-calls that leave the lasting impressions.

Finestra Art Space, 410 S. Michigan Ave., suite 516, 847-977-0526; finestraartspace.com. Through Jan. 30, 2010