

Art review: Petah Coyne's 'Untitled #1411 (Jane Austen)' is a frothy delight

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Petah Coyne's large hanging sculpture "Untitled #1411 (Jane Austen)" dangles between decadent froth and danger, like a baroque chandelier that has emerged on the far side of a waxy snowstorm — the sort of thing you might expect Tim Burton to conjure.

It's the largest of two hanging pieces by the internationally celebrated Coyne in the group show "Certain Women" at Nancy Littlejohn Fine Art. They function both as stars and outliers among walls of mostly figurative paintings by nine other artists.

Enveloped in Coyne's patented, durable wax coating (a formula that's allowed to drip opulently as it dries), "Jane Austen" resembles a wedding bouquet that has been hung upside down to dry. The flowers are a mix of black and white peonies, interspersed with ringlets of ribbon. (Coyne's materials include actual ribbon as well as silk Duchesse satin, Velcro, thread, paper towels and plastic.)

The top spray of gathered lace (chicken wire, actually) would have been its base when someone carried it down an aisle. I can't help it: That section reminds me of the lace caps the Georgian-era author would have worn as she wrote "Pride and Prejudice" or "Sense and Sensibility"— especially with the ringlets below. But would Coyne really have made an abstract portrait? Female literary figures are among her most frequent muses, but her work is more thematically powerful than that.

The evocative weight of the piece really lies on the floor, where it appears 10 faded blossoms have fallen, hinting at loss, mortality and memories — an essential *memento mori* flourish.

Although Coyne's work is in the permanent collections of dozens of major museums, Houston's institutions are not among them —at least not yet. And her only previous Houston appearance was 11 years ago, in "Damaged Romanticism: A Mirror of Modern Emotion" at the Blaffer.

This makes "Jane Austen" a rare sighting. The paintings of "Certain Women" deserve a look as well — think pretty color palettes with an edge. Trouble seems to be brewing in Vera Iliatova's voyeuristic pastoral scenes. Deborah Brown places nudes in canoes with dogs, while Judith Linhares renders her voracious holiday goddess in vivid brush strokes.

"Certain Women" is on view through July 27 at Nancy Littlejohn Fine Art, 3465-B W. Alabama; 832-740-4288, nancylittlejohnfineart.com.

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