

Challenging viewers to jump through 'Loops'

By [Cate McQuaid](#)

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Julia Hechtman's "Lost in Translation," part of her exhibit that melds film scenes and the Icelandic landscape. (Lamontagne Gallery)

"Strange Loops," a group show in the Mills Gallery at the Boston Center for the Arts, is deliberately neither here nor there. Mills Gallery curator José Luis Blondet has gathered works that shuttle from figuration to abstraction, from language to image, from finite to infinite.

JULIA HECHTMAN: I Wish, I Wish

LAURA HARRISON: Crypto Egypto

At: LaMontagne Gallery, 555 East 2nd St., South Boston, through Dec. 23. 617-464-4640, www.lamontagnegallery.com

The results are often both discomfoting and intriguing. As the art loops back and forth, so does our perception of it, depending on the way our brains process and organize information.

Language uses different neural circuitry than pictures do, for instance. Look at Tatyana Gubash's "Untitled Installation #1," falling somewhere in between, and a cerebral buzz that is part confusion, part attempted problem-solving sets in. Gubash has obsessively covered one page with script-like marks; it looks a dark, knotty tapestry. She magnified and projected this piece on the wall, pulling out different elements, making more than 50 smaller drawings that fill one wall. Some of them turn into language, such as her signature; others are covered in smoky, delicate loops. It's as if she's a scientist, looking through a microscope at a sliver of a mysterious organism - in this case, her own art - attempting to understand it better.

Fred Muram's video "My Right Your Left" illustrates his own brain short-circuiting in the midst of a loop. He has penned "your left" and "your right" on the palms of his hands, and "my right," "my left" on the backs, and the video shows his hands turning over and over, as he recites the words. But his hands are quicker than his mouth; he stumbles over the language, losing track of where he is.

Matthew Rich, whose work cycles cleverly between flat and three-dimensional, here makes sculptures based on photographs of celebrities. Seen from one vantage point, they resemble the image in the photo, but as they stretch back, they veer into abstraction.

Abstract painter Peter Hoss makes assemblages in trash cans using wire mesh, plastic fencing, and shredded paper. They work the way passages of color or gesture work in his paintings, but also resemble urban still lifes, odd flowers in trash-can vases.

There's plenty more to chew on in "Strange Loops," which is a sometimes vexing, always challenging exhibit, not for those who prefer their art serene.

Blondet is screening "Matinee/Matiné," the latest video by the internationally recognized artist Liliana Porter, in the back room at the Mills. Porter uses tiny figurines to tell disarming stories that often question the nature of reality. The video features a series of her charming vignettes.

The first, "Lincoln Continental," features close-up shots of models of figures from the Kennedy assassination. Jackie in her pink dress sits beside Jack, and ominous music plays as the car moves forward. Then we see that the road is merely two lines drawn on white paper, and a hand appears and shoves the car backward. Porter makes her own loop, conjuring potent stories with her figurines, then reminding us that they are just toys and their landscapes are just drawings.

Endless days

Julia Hechtman spent her summer photographing Iceland. She didn't want to just shoot the majestic landscape; she wanted to make images that were not postcard-perfect but integrated her experience there. She focuses, in her exhibit at LaMontagne Gallery, on figures in the landscape.

Hechtman also took 10 of her favorite movies with her to Iceland, to divide, she says in her artist's statement, summer days that never ended. The films are the ground upon which she builds her photos, borrowing images, or sometimes just moods, from "Cool Hand Luke," "Harold and Maude," and "Black Robe," among others. It's as if in those endless days, she entered a netherworld of filmic dreams and fantasy that even a swift hike couldn't shake off.

The photos are beautiful, with an Iceland summer's diamond gleam. Hechtman's "Harold and Maude" quotes a familiar shot of two figures, side by side, seen from behind, here humbled against the backdrop of a forever sky. "Lost in Translation" presents an enormous leap, from the Tokyo streetscapes where that film was set to a mossy Icelandic hummock upon which a man sprawls in his parka. No, he's not Bill Murray on his hotel bed, but there's a quality of desolation that's familiar.

These films are a common currency; they bring something familiar to the stark, unfamiliar Icelandic landscape and help us find our place there, alongside the artist.

Also at LaMontagne, Laura Harrison is onto something with her large, chattering paintings. The works' substrata are stencils borrowed from other paintings of buildings, but they read like hieroglyphs. She uses these as a grid over which she develops deep space, introduces rooms and narratives, plays with figure and ground, and occasionally tags on abstract painterly flourishes. The work still feels tentative and experimental, but it's got wonderful potential. Harrison and Hechtman will be on hand on Saturday at 4 p.m. for artist talks with Institute of Contemporary Art associate curator Randi Hopkins and critic Joe Fyfe.