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Like the rain, Swarm was a long time coming

Three-day gallery crawl was
an informal art extravaganza

Swarm 4

Festival of artist-run culture
Various locations, Sept. 4, 5, 6.

BY MICHAEL HARRIS

SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Gallery openings are suspicious things at the best of times: as free wine flows and congratulatory back-patting rises, the art itself can recede from the spotlight.

But Swarm, three-day gallery crawl that dominated last weekend's art scene, is a uniquely informal art extravaganza. For many, Swarm is the only gallery-going to be accomplished all year. With a dozen artist-run exhibits drawing the red curtain simultaneously, the buzz frequently reaches fever pitch. (Kicking off the fall season with such a large bang is not without its drawbacks. Past Swarms have been rife with the unfortunate by-products of a good party: severe vandalism, tagging, gum on walls and even impromptu [i.e. unauthorized] performances that left curators of fragile exhibits with many a frayed nerve.)

Last year, an inebriated young man engaged in frottage with Kathy Slade's explicitly feminist instalment at the Western Front. Misogynistic criticism? No, just drunken idiocy.

This year, Slade's contribution to Swarm was rather more gratefully received. Her meditation on lustful desire, entitled *I Want it All I Want it Now*, shows at the Or gallery until October 11.

Slade's machine-stitched embroidery presents the loud-mouthed Veruca Salt from Roald Dahl's much-loved *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. The work succeeds in calling up the ardent and selfish side of youth, while remaining sympathetic to Dahl's "bad" girl.

Veruca Salt, the spoiled little rich girl who wants a golden-egg-laying goose in the film, is remade by an outline of black thread over crimson panels. In the screaming space of her open mouth, the threads clot as though to gag her cries. Her passionate song — "I want the world/I want the whole world/I want to lock it/All up in my pocket/It's my bar of chocolate" — is cut off.

In the oldest of kid's lit. traditions, she is severely punished. The effect, like all good comedy, is unsettling.

Just a block away, the frightful moralizing of Roald Dahl gives way to the even more sinister creations of New Zealand's Anne Shelton. In a series of seven photographic diptychs at One Point Six gallery, Shelton chronicles the scenes of real-life murders.

Each location, photographed in a cinematic style, forces the viewer to consider the ways we fictionalize tragedy — we make stories, movies, myths, out of someone else's disaster.

The broad daylight in these landscapes is a deep freeze; the absence of any human life makes them gorgeously austere. And all the more spooky.

Saturday's finale to the Swarm weekend, however, was cheerfully crowded. Despite the sudden thunder and rain, hundreds came out to usher in the new season. Like the rain itself, the once-a-year Swarm was a long time coming.

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