

## **A clever show about death and longing from artist Joe Peragine**

**By Felicia Feaster - For the AJC**

**September 14, 2015**

It's hard not to admire the tenacity and boundless imagination of artists. To create his most recent show at Midtown 's Marcia Wood Gallery, artist Joe Peragine went the extra mile to realize his vision, and taught himself taxidermy from YouTube videos. The autodidact animal stuffer used roadkill and frozen animals ordered online to create the mini-dioramas laced with pathos and absurdity on view in *Love Me Till My Heart Stops*, a solo show that unites that adorable-bizarre taxidermy, paintings, photographs and a whole lot of sweetness on steroids. The show is deliciously, laugh-out-loud funny, with its mix of morbidity (all the adorable animals in the show are, after all, deceased) and cuteness.

Peragine's inspiration for *Love Me Till My Heart Stops* is the fascinating nature-under-a-bell jar dioramas found in the great halls of New York's American Museum of Natural History. Those exhibitions by turns dreamy and creepy re-creation of the natural world in the most artificial and mediated manner possible has compelled Peragine to create his own fugues on the fakery of display.

A series of documentary-style black-and-white photographs show natural history museum taxidermy specimens whose time has run out. The crime scene-style images are grotesque, sad and heartbreaking in a way: an island of lost toys and long-dead creatures whose days on the exhibition floor are long gone.

No grown man has ever shown such an avidity for ducklings, bunnies and other denizens of nursery school storybooks and Easter baskets as Atlanta-based artist Peragine. The natural world remains an abiding subject for an artist who sees nature and its perils as a metaphor for our own circumstance.

Long before the Internet discovered the click bait of kittens, Peragine was stocking his paintings with those frolicsome felines and their fellow baby animal brethren. For Peragine, a painting of a pink-eyed albino rabbit in a field, *Yellow Dandelions*, or a kitten peeking out from a grassy meadow in *Kitten Meadow* resound with vulnerability and innocence.

As its hyperbolic title suggests, *Love Me Till My Heart Stops* is an assault of cuteness of magnificent proportions, even considering Peragine's track record. But underlying all of that fluffiness is a macabre sense of humor about the lengths human beings will go to capture something sweet under glass, destroying it in the process.

A number of Peragine's paintings feature squirrels, ducklings, birds and rabbits rendered in hazy terms, like something seen through a camera lens coated in a layer of Vaseline. Those images suggest the impossible yearning of all of us to stop time and freeze-frame the things we love.

In the funny, grotesque *Chipmunk/Glass Dome*, a chipmunk bearing a strangely ardent expression is housed under a glass dome in a perfect scene of natural splendor, a forest of foliage and yellow flowers surrounding the tiny creature. The perversity of the scene is that, of course, that perfect natural vignette can only be captured with a great deal of human intervention and the chipmunk's demise.

In *Starry Night Rabbit*, Peragine creates an even more artificial tableau and a sort of stage set featuring a sweet, delicate white rabbit perched on a bed of green grass. Look closely, though, and you'll notice the bunny's mouth is held closed thanks to long straight pins piercing his soft fur mug. And you only have to peek around the sides of this scene to register the fakery of what Peragine has created: the dripping paint, the pretend blades of grass, a scene of natural splendor revealed to be a sham.

The show is a commentary on the hand of the artist, that showbiz impresario who creates perfect and utterly fake simulacrum of an ideal world for our delectation.

Bottom line: A perversely clever show about the human desire to preserve an ideal.