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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

Cathy Cunningham-Little show in Oakland

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Utopian visions seldom enter contemporary art unpolluted by irony, by pandering interactivity or by disheartening historical reference.

So the work of Texas artist Cathy Cunningham-Little stunned me with its finding of a new key for utopian optimism: optical euphoria as a foretaste of utopia. It stands out in the two-person show, with Amy M. Ho, at Chandra Cerrito Contemporary in Oakland, titled "Immaterial." (Closed between the holidays, the gallery will reopen Thursday.)

Cunningham-Little works with light and carefully shaped planar bits of "dichroic" glass. Coated with vaporized metals, dichroic glass permits the artist to control the hues of the shadows and the reflections that her forms cast. The shapes these projections take depends on those of the glass elements and on the positioning of overhead lights.

While we can grasp almost too easily the constructive logic of a piece such as "Little Metamorphosis" (2012), to spurn its dazzlement would just feel spiteful.

Vulnerability to dismissal - as precious eyewash, as come-lately Op art - counts in favor of Cunningham-Little's work. It shares that quality with the fluorescent light sculpture of Dan Flavin (1933-1996), especially when he was a newcomer.

But the anxiety that rises with our resource-consciousness gives Cunningham-Little's dependence on the electrical grid a depth that no one claimed for Flavin's. Her works function as beacons to mark our subjective attachment to all that we fear to lose if the lights go out - for good. The 2012 network television series "Revolution" capitalized on the suppressed fear that they might.

Cunningham-Little's radiant constructions have an ancestry in the "light and space" art of people such as Larry Bell, Robert Irwin and James Turrell. Her splay of shadows and reflections may even bring to mind some once futuristic-looking formal inventions of the early 20th century Russian avant-garde.

But unlike these predecessors, Cunningham-Little seems to want her pieces to grant us, if only for an instant, the unalloyed pleasure in experience that reality is forever chivvying - hence her work's utopian air.

Amy Ho has made a name for herself in the Bay Area with video projections that open up virtual spaces in architecture, like the undiscovered rooms in their dwellings that people frequently dream of finding.

She has tried to package her illusionism in a series of wall-mounted light boxes that have none of videos' disquieting effect, perhaps they lack the streaming present-tense-ness of the projections.

Fortunately, visitors can decide for themselves, as Ho has a new projection at the back of the gallery.

"Up: Down II" (2012) throws identical images on wall and floor. A flight of stairs - actually a dollhouse-scale fabrication, like all of Ho's spaces - seems to lead to an upper story in one projection and to a basement in the other. The piece makes a stairway landing of the gallery floor.

Characteristically the faint stirring of information in the digital projection overcomes the eye and mind's skepticism of the images. A slight disorientation sets in, as if a fall through the floor could actually occur.

A staircase denuded of anyone to descend it of course brings Marcel Duchamp to mind. But visitors who happened to see Robert Gober's 1997 installation at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art of a staircase with cascading water or Bill Viola's video that climaxes with a similar deluge down steps will find their expectations uncomfortably heightened here.