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“Mist of the Earth” | Art review

Brazilian artist Denise Milan brings her collages to the Chicago Cultural Center. *By Jennifer Swann*

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Denise Milan, *Ancestral #1*, 2012

Photo: Courtesy of Denise Milan

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Brazilian artist [Denise Milan](#)'s work can be seen in Chicago in the form of a granite and marble permanent installation at Northerly Island near the Adler Planetarium. But the vibrant, figurative photo collages in “[Mist of the Earth](#),” her solo show at the [Chicago Cultural Center](#), are playful deviations from her solemn public sculpture.

The exhibition consists of three rooms: Paradise, Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained. Each title suggests a narrative about the endangered coastal rain forests near Paraty, Brazil. The first room, Paradise, contains a series of aluminum-mounted assemblages of half-human, half-animal rain-forest creatures that appear to have been cut and pasted by hand, evidenced by tears in the photographs and curls in the paper. The bizarre hybrid figures bring to mind Anne Geddes's kitschy portrait photos, but with children disguised as snakes and toucans rather than sunflowers and bunnies.

In Paradise Lost, the collages are darker in both subject matter and color. Crude patches of gold, silver and bronze layered over tropical landscapes suggest the commodification of natural resources, but Milan maintains a level of abstraction that doesn't tout overt political objectives. In the final room, plants and flowers morph grotesquely with human body parts, perhaps reflecting a return to a symbiotic relationship with the Earth, a kind of Paradise Regained.

Severely out of place, however, are two unlabeled bronze sculptures in the center of two galleries, seemingly forgotten by the curators. Other sloppy curatorial moves include exhibition labels made from standard printer paper indiscreetly taped to the walls, almost as an afterthought. The unprofessional presentation of the works is disappointing, especially considering the power of Milan's images.