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Robert Fishko, *Director*

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ART IN REVIEW

Maria Tomasula **'Second Nature'**

Forum Gallery
745 Fifth Avenue, at 57th Street
Manhattan
Through April 5

By New York art world standards, Maria Tomasula's Magic Realist still-life paintings could not be less cool. Applying paint smoothly onto wooden panels with a miniaturist's fastidious touch, this young Chicago artist makes images of shrinelike set-ups consisting of fruit, flower blossoms, glass beads, ornate fabrics, doll parts, bones, string and many other found materials. With their quasi-religious symbols, glowing jewel-like colors and old masterly technique, the paintings hark back to Renaissance vanitas tradition; surrealistic drollery saves them from heavy-handedness.

Resting on a blue velvet cushion in a corner, a peeled pear sweats big glassy beads of water. The still attached strips of its skin are nailed to the distressed brown wall, turning the fruit into a comical martyred saint. In "Birth of My Silence" a stuffed hummingbird, attached to a red wall by strings tied to nails, appears to be flying heavenward; glistening water droplets radiate from the center like rays of divine light. "Corona," in which a rotten brown pear on a fancy cushion is haloed by a circle of fat, iridescent blue flies, meditates on the corruptibility of the flesh.

Ms. Tomasula's larger, easel-size paintings have a less concentrated illusionism; on a small scale her wry allegories of death, resurrection and erotic sensuality are uncannily vivid. **KEN JOHNSON**