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Art: Pluck of the Draw

Mark makers 'sketch' outside boundaries at Jackson Artworks

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By: Michael Joe Krainak

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"Falling Figure #2," by Sora Kimberlain

A little more than a year ago, Modern Arts Midwest featured one of 2008's most significant exhibits curated by Norman Geske, director emeritus of the Sheldon Museum of Art in Lincoln. The show was called simply "Drawing," and it was less a group of the region's "best drawers" and more a revelation of the art form itself whatever the style or medium.

"All the work in this show began as a few marks on a page," Geske said at the time, "a declaration of who I am, that magic moment, a conjunction of inspiration and a few marks on paper. It's the impulse of humans in the most primal sense to make a mark."

Taking its cue, at least unconsciously, from the MAM exhibit, Jackson Artworks opened its own variation of the form, "Mark Makers," which will continue at its 1108 Jackson St. location through Aug. 2. Curated by director and artist Christina Narwicz, "Mark Makers" is an eclectic grouping of 22 new, emerging and established artists who, despite their differences, share what Geske says is the same internal motivation, "to just sit down, even without an idea, with an unknown intention, and make their mark."

Though "Mark Makers" stretches beyond Geske's traditional view of drawing, it is the most successful large group show seen thus far in Omaha in 2009. In fact, it is the best opportunity the viewer will have to experience a survey of the region's most talented artists, that is, until the opening of the annual Bemis auction exhibition Oct. 2. Aside from its own intentions, "Mark Makers" succeeds for two reasons. First, because of its diversity which places three new artists from Lincoln, Heidi Bartlett, Samuel B. Rapien and Anthony Hawley alongside such established and emerging artists as Catherine Ferguson, Larry Sasso, Jeff King and Iggy Sumnik. Secondly, it mixes and matches successfully a variety of traditional and contemporary styles from the likes of Joe Broghammer, James Freeman and Kristin Pluhacek that redefine the form as either "dry paintings" (Broghammer and Freeman) and or "wet drawings" (Pluhacek and Rapien).

The exhibit's diversity and bold thinking outside the box demonstrates that marks can be gestural or expressive, as in the work from Sora Kimberlain, Terry Rosenberg and Narwicz herself or controlled and precise as with Broghammer, Ferguson and Sasso. Marks extended become lines defined or ephemeral. They can shape solid objects as with Peggy Gomez or merely suggest them as with Ferguson. Lines can appear to be in constant flux, shape shifting either with figures (Kimberlain) or atmospheric as in the delicate renderings of Mary Day.

Mark making also shapes and gives form to genre and point of view whether it be the comic narratives of Bob Hall, the street inspired art of King or the social and cultural protest of printmaker Joey Lynch. Making one's mark can also push beyond boundaries of form and materials. Susan Knight accomplishes this with two abstract pieces on packing and cut paper and Bartlett creates elegant retro Victorian-style cutouts and shadow boxes. Lastly, the art of mark making can transport us psychologically as in the disturbing imaginings of Freeman's nightmarish cosmos or conceptually into the social protest of Sumnik's view of the future. No matter where we go with the artist in this show we are sure to be entertained, enlightened and challenged.

Though most of the work in the exhibit is current, and while much of it indicates new directions, there are a few notable exceptions. It is nice to see Ferguson's "Orapendulas" isolated from her similar sculptures made of willow and dogwood so that one can enjoy these highly intricate "hanging nests" in pen and ink. The same can be said for Rosenberg's two action/abstractions, "Rebecca's # 1 & 2" and Broghammer's two dry paintings, "Testing Merlin" and "Birthday Bird," which continue respectively, the former's exploration of time and motion and the latter's surreal, personal allegories.

Meanwhile, several artists offer new work outside their comfort zone. They include experimental abstract pieces from Narwicz and Leslie Iwai and expressionistic figurative ones from Pluhacek and Kimberlain. In the past Narwicz's abstract paintings have more than hinted at floral patterns and other natural representation. Here "Deluge's "very title indicates a freer association that borders on the chaotic and discordant. Though Iwai's color palette is similar to Narwicz's earthy and elemental greens, browns, yellows and pinks, her "Germinate" also hints at an image whose pattern of lines is more fluid and formal as they rise gracefully to the surface rather than burst and scatter as in the former piece.

While Iwai's new direction is a real departure from her more familiar installation and sculptural work, viewers may also not recognize the two expressive figures from Pluhacek, "Leo Knows" and "Molly Sees." Known more for her large floral arrangements, these more emotional and personal companion pieces eschew Pluhacek's previous soft, pastel palette and employ darker, neon tones, the use of black and an angular POV. The two startling figures look sketched in one setting, both temporary and contemporary as they drip dry layered in a motif of emoticons.

Even more startling is the powerful new work in black and white from Kimberlain, "Falling Figures 1 & 2." Her work has always been dramatic and psychological. This time her figures are even more primordial as they blend and swirl in and out of their preternatural background as if in some sort of gestation, perhaps that of the artist herself in the creative process. Speaking of which, one can also enjoy four marvelous pen and inks from comics genius Bob Hall which became pages from "Batman, DOA," a 1999 DC comics and his incredibly inventive and graphic series, "Armed and Dangerous II." Hall's illustrations are so moving and cinematic in design the text goes virtually unread until a second viewing.

Not to be outdone, we flash forward to newcomer Rapien's three large pen and ink washes, "No Child Left Behind," "M3L3NCOL1" and "Degenerative Housewife" that resemble the animation style of Richard Linklater. Rapien, too, has an imaginative flair for the dramatic and graphic, but he measures it with a social conscience and a touch of irony. Like the others in this very fine show, his mark making is a clear "declaration of who I am."

Comments

Jul 27, 2009

Laying a concrete floor

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Jul 26, 2009

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Jul 21, 2009

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Jul 16, 2009

Mark Makers

Yeah, yippee! good show. Nice to see Omaha stepping it up!

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