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Border Crossings



Bemis exhibit explores beyond the margins of contemporary abstract art

by Michael J. Krainak

Perhaps abstract art's greatest asset is that it allows artist and viewer the opportunity for free expression and association. To not only create outside the box, but to appreciate work beyond conventional wisdom and experience. In that light the relevant questions isn't "What is art?" but "What is abstract art?"

Borderland Abstraction, an impressive survey of 13 artists at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, addresses that question well beyond the obvious: Abstract art is a form of art that is mostly non-representational or figurative. Borderland Abstraction continues that discussion with a contemporary twist, according to show organizer Hesse McGraw, Bemis Center curator.

"The dialogue about abstract art has become so stratified," McGraw told about 100 patrons at a recent Artist Talk at Bemis, "that camps have developed in opposition to [one] another. This exhibit includes current work from several generations that straddles disciplines, extended references and external attractions. We want to make the work feel right in a space that extends appreciation, to have pieces enliven one another, to form crosscurrents."

The exhibit features artists Nils Folke Anderson, Tim Bavington, Nate Boyce, Michelle Grabner, Amy Granat, Mary Heilmann, Matthew Kluber, Takeshi Murata, Ara Peterson, Eli Ping, Eric Sall, Colin C. Smith and Wendy White. As a survey of contemporary abstract art, it is the finest display of its kind this side of the private collection of Omahan Phil Schrage, with which it has much in common. Since the show runs until May 8, multiple visits will reward the viewer as did Signal Channel, Bemis' 2006 survey of video art.

In spite of McGraw's resistance to didactic labels, there is an aesthetic and thematic flow to the exhibit further enhanced by the laminated list of works provided at the desk. The recently renovated galleries on the first floor are impressive as each piece in the show enjoys its own space and spotlight. The lighting is dramatic and flattering, especially on Peterson's sculpture and Smith's tableaux.

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Equally impressive are the groupings themselves. Consider the juxtaposed "Go Ask Alice," an oil on canvas by Heilmann and "Freshkills," an acrylic on five connected canvases by White. Arguably both examples of geometric abstraction, each disrupts a formal pattern with an organic counterpart. In the former, a tidal wave of pure hues engulfs the organized color field in a way both sensual and personal. "Freshkills" is a clever take on street art as it references a landfill on Staten Island created from 9/11 residue. Chaotic mark-making invades White's formal structure not unlike graffiti or tagging in a case of art imitating art imitating life.

In the same gallery two pieces, Grabner's "Untitled" silverpoint on an oval panel, and Peterson's "Untitled" acrylic paint on wood, enjoy a certain call and response on opposite walls — reinforcing that each isn't exactly what it appears to be, thus messing with genre and material. Grabner's work resembles finely etched steel and becomes more dynamic from a distance as it captures and reflects light, encouraging the eye to focus inward even as one backs up. Conversely, Peterson's black, carved woodblock becomes more intriguing close up as one gets lost in its maze-like texture.

This wooden frieze looks both sturdy and fragile, a quality it shares with the artist's neon "Orange Tube" of wood and acrylic. Though it resembles ceramic pipe at a construction site, its delicate sculpting and graceful twist makes it appear to be carved from plastic foam. Which is the medium of two imposing white free-form "outdoor sculptures" from Anderson that seem a bit cramped and unwieldy indoors.

Two additional artists, Bavington and Kluber, more than flirt with the illusion of reality. Bavington's shimmering "Cold Fire," a synthetic polymer on canvas, is a hypnotic paradox of light and energy. Trying to focus on its virtual shape-shifting is like watching an Aurora Borealis, exhilarating yes, yet almost painful. The same effect occurs with Kluber's illusion, an "Untitled" alkyd painting on aluminum with projection. Inspired originally by watching his computer crash, he uses software to project a similar digital video within a designated space on the painting, a radiant, vibrating dialogue between digital and analog abstract art.

Overall, the most impressive work in this exhibit may be that of Omahan Smith best known for his beautifully nuanced and ultra flat abstract paintings made with resin and pigment on aluminum. Here, Smith combines a similar technique on panels and vases along with the random drippings of thick pigment-permeated resin on mostly found vases that resemble wine bottles covered with multi-colored, melted candle wax. With whimsical titles such as "Pancho and Lefty finally spot Charlie Chaplin in Times Square," these works are a striking contrast in both the figurative and the poetic.

Especially effective of Smith's is another call and response in opposing corners of the back gallery that are a mirror image of each other. The first is a familiar tableau of vases and painted backdrop, but "Las Tres Bandidas de Omaha," arguably, the most striking single piece here reverses the process with a mural of said ooziings resembling an artist's working palette fronted by three vases painted in Smith's signature, translucent style. More than any other work it exemplifies the exhibit's intent "to explore the vibrant cracks in between contemporary abstraction."

Borderland Abstraction continues at the Bemis Contemporary Arts Center, 12th and Leavenworth, through May 8. For more information visit bemiscenter.org.

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