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Leap of Faith



By Caleb Coppock

Three Bemis installations journey Underground into the unknown

by Michael J. Krainak

Because its current exhibit features installation art, the Bemis Underground looks like its old self. Unlike previous shows virtually dominated by traditional mediums (there were significant exceptions) Manager/Curator Brigitte McQueen organized three installations that, despite appearances, have more than a little in common.

Viewed in this order for optimum effect, Omaha artist Stephen Azevedo offers a disturbing look at a scene of mayhem circa the Sharon Tate murders by the Charles Manson "family" in Heavens to Mergatroid. Yinghua Zhu, an MFA candidate at UNL and future Bemis artist-in-residence from China, guides the viewer on many levels through a cultural awakening via letter-laced corridors. The journey ends at the wall and corner installation of Caleb Coppock, an Omaha-based art director, designer and animator.

Soft Rot (remix) appears to be merely works on the wall in pencil and encaustic, but Coppock's "room" is also greater than the sum of its parts.

Though these installations don't seem connected or similar, step back and look at the Underground itself, the space they share for their site-specific art. The venue again looks like part of the exhibit, transformed by the art, rather than just displaying it.



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By Yinghua Zhu

Installations meld themselves with the walls, ceilings, columns and floors, as well as the nooks and crannies. They even dictate traffic patterns, unique points of view and places to hang out or interact. The three artists and curator manage this individually while creating an interesting continuity.

Though the Underground always exhibits three strong, separate artists for each show, a little imagination and analysis has always revealed certain similar formalities and/or concerns. In the case of Azevedo, Zhu and Coppock, they appear to explore, among other things, preternatural themes at three symbolic "stages" of physical and spiritual growth. In each stage, each artist assumes a particular role, personal or otherwise, while inviting the viewer on this journey.

Preternatural means existing outside of what is natural or ordinary, but it implies, especially in art and literature, a means by which to understand and live within the material world. The first evidence of this otherworldliness is Zhu's stand-alone vivid red door beckoning us to move from east to west between a filigree of black curtains made of the alphabet. But before we can move in that direction, another black object may catch our attention, a forbidding shroud-like tent with flaps closed. In fact, Azevedo is counting on it.

Inside this ominous room is a scenario, conjured by the artist that recreates a Life magazine photo of the pregnant, murdered Sharon Tate and friend Lee Sebring. In this life-size scene, their stuffed likenesses are sprawled upon the floor complete with splattered blood made of fabric on clothes and sofa. Walls of glaring red curtains and an empty, white vinyl, comfy chair complete this surreal vignette a la David Lynch.

Azevedo, ever the Sorcerer, wonders if we are simultaneously drawn to and repulsed by violent death in reality, media and art as a "coping mechanism."

While we are attracted, yet desensitized by violence in all types of media, Azevedo said during his artist talk, "we largely ignore natural death. Are we so obsessed we don't want to deal with the way we will probably die?"

It's hard to argue against his premise, but it is also true that many in the crowd that morning and at a recent weekday visit didn't want to deal with that drawn black curtain, either. Maybe it was the written preview that held them back. More likely the wall of bloodied knives opposite the room. Of those who did brave the macabre scene, virtually no one entered the room, many pulling back. Credit the artist for the effect. In spite of our collective fascination with this ultimate unknown, maybe this bit of history is just too close for comfort.

For some, confronting, entering and even sitting in the midst of this slice of history could be a cleansing or purge of living with or giving tacit approval to any form of violence. But after leaving this scene visibly shaken, what then? Again, the red door beckons? For Zhu's 58.1 Miles, the greatest unknown is not death, but life. If death can be accepted, rather than indulged, then perhaps one is ready to begin the journey anew, whether it's just a look around the corner or,

for others including the artist, living and working in a new cultural surrounding.

Zhu's role in her more personal and poetic installation is that of the Buddha, both disciple and guide on a road to enlightenment. Her palette of red door, black curtains and encased white roped balls hanging inside is familiar, but her own cultural reference fortifies her on the journey, as well as the viewer, once it's understood. In China, generally speaking, the color red is a summoning and a promise of good luck and happiness. Black symbolizes the wintry season and a movement westerly toward renewal, and white suggests purification through death to the old self.



By Stephen Azevedo

As we move through this entire exhibition, it's fitting that Zhu's answer to a world of cults, prejudice and isolation is enlightenment through language via her lettered corridor. "Walking along the wall of words," she wrote in her artist statement, "is a journey to seek truth behind layers of meaning ... I encourage the viewer's mental and physical willingness to navigate through unfamiliar territory." The goal of this Buddha-esque quest, Zhu said in her artist talk, is otherness or the appreciation of inevitable cultural clashes while questioning and reinvesting in her own culture. Zhu points out that life's journey is often deceptive. "I think I am at the finish, but instead I find myself back at the beginning with new findings yet to comprehend."

We also begin again "with new findings" when we venture finally into Coppock's equally deceptive installation, *Soft Rot* (remix). Language is no longer the cue for personal growth and creativity. Instead, Coppock explained during his talk, he uses found objects and ephemera as catalysts for his largely abstract drawings and paintings, one of which not only hangs on the wall but becomes the wall. By combining the natural with the human-made into something new, often with the aid of a jeweler's loupe, Coppock is our alchemist, one who can indefinitely prolong life through the process of transforming something common into something precious.

With works such as "Formation" and "Bemis Sidewalk," two stunning encaustic-on-wood panels that combine the organic with geometric patterns, this alchemist has taken the familiar, even the ordinary, and turned it into the extraordinary, even preternatural.

It's like gazing at freshly turned earth or poured cement embedded with crop circles and other astronomical geometric patterns and imagining their origins.

With these installations, the cycle of life begins anew conceptually as it suggests that creativity begins with a purge of past negativity, moves forward with acceptance and an open mind, then imagines a better world. A bit of a stretch perhaps, but installations have their own rules of engagement; one of which is "engage." They invite interaction and interpretation. And, if it is true that a work of art has a life of its own, imagine how three installations might "talk" to one another in close proximity in ways unintended. Now that is a leap of faith worth taking, for both an artist and an enlightened viewer.

58.1 Miles: Yinghua Zhu, Heavens to Mergatroid: Stephen Azevedo and Soft Rot

*(Remix): Caleb Coppock all continue through Sept. 17 at Bemis Underground.
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