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bemisUNDERGROUND show asks viewer to 'Vision/Re-Envision' art of painting

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By: Michael Joe Krainak
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The title of bemisUNDERGROUND's new exhibit, "Vision/Re-Envision," might give viewers pause as they enter the venue's edgy environs, but that is just what the name implies and this installation delivers.

"Look/Re-Think," in other words, how technology can alter painting in ways that are recognizable, yet unique in form, and both familiar and ambiguous in meaning. This exhibit of traditional and pixilated paintings, digital landscapes, videos and mixed media, which runs until Sept. 13, is the collaboration of two University of Nebraska at Omaha graduates, Matt Carlson with a BFA in painting and Phillip Faulkner, who recently earned an MFA in electronic media and design at Denver University following a BFA from UNO in 2005.

Carlson contributes mostly several series of gouache, a type of tempera, on paper, a mixed media wall painting and several digital prints while Faulkner adds video presentations, lightjet prints and mixed media on wood. No attempt

was made to transform bU as well, as its most memorable installations have, but "Vision/Re-Envision" does take advantage of the venue's unique challenges and opportunities to professionally present an exhibit fresh on the heels of the equally successful "Nest Egg," created by Bryce Speed and Eric Wilson.

The two shows are similar not only in their media choices and different tones and points of view, but in the way the artists embraced the space and hung and lit their respective work. "The Underground is like a rental property you first fall in love with," Faulkner said, "and then a second visit reveals the problems and challenges, and you begin to trouble shoot as to how it will all come together."

"Vision/Re-Envision" does indeed come together, but from decidedly different directions. Though "painting" is the common form, each artist creates in different mediums, styles and tones. In addition, as indicated by the title, the work is conceptual with an emphasis on process, which both Carlson and Faulkner hope is readily apparent.

"Formalism is a strong motivation for both of us," Faulkner said. "I hope that shows through in the end product. I have always been interested in the way artworks are made and try to reveal the means by which the end is achieved. Content is always a subjective experience, but form seems to offer a more universal element for audience appreciation."

With his interest in how technology can alter tools of painting as well as mediums, the above is most readily apparent in two Faulkner video installations, both called "Backgrounds," one of pixels on five monitors and the other in stripes via overhead projectors and LCD panels. Each are creative and energetic time-based designs, but the latter is more heavily processed, a sort of "prehistoric office presentation" utilizing '80s and '90s technology originally priced at thousands of dollars and purchased by Faulkner on eBay for a tiny fraction of that cost.

Process and time are also concerns of Carlson, both theoretically and in practice. "I have been using gouache almost exclusively now and really love the rich velvety surface that it leaves on paper," he said, "and it is great for detail and fine line work. I am drawn to painting in a very flat and graphic manner, which at times leads people to think that the work is done digitally. I am interested in that illusion which is sometimes created."

The most overt example of this process is seen with Carlson's "MM" series, which emulates Faulkner's videos with their strips of colorful pixels virtually flying off the canvas or pulsating ribbon-like as if watching them on a computer screen. It is similar to watching a DVD or a

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cable sports event “break up” before your eyes, an effect sometimes more interesting than the event or film itself. Carlson is right about the illusion as it takes a very close-up look to determine that each pixel ad ribbon was hand-painted in gouache.

That is not the only illusion, or better yet, duplicity that exists in “Vision/Re-Envision” especially as to theme. “Both Phillip and I have similar ideas about the pros and cons of technology,” Carlson said. “I am more interested in nostalgic and symbolic imagery. The pixel to me is an iconic image, and the pixel paintings were inspired by digital sketches I was doing in the primitive design application, Microsoft Paint. When we first started coming up with ideas for the show I was really interested in these simple but labor intensive abstract paintings but as time progressed I became interested in introducing narrative into the work.”

This can best be appreciated in the first three series of Carlson’s paintings as the work progresses from the figurative to the narrative to the more abstract. In the first set the paintings are intense and expressive, each primarily a portrait with a pixilated visage. The effect is puzzling and disconcerting both in subject and technique. Organic faces, part paint by number, part Rubik’s Cube, clash with windowpane shirts resembling digital screens or patterns. “Geo Dome” conjures up an image of an alien hologram circa 70’s “Outer Limits,” both futuristic and nostalgic.

By contrast, Carlson’s second series is more minimalist and introspective as he abandons the figure for sparse, beautifully rendered landscapes, geometric shapes and organic pixilated masses that somehow appear both mysterious and sympathetic. With titles such as “Wood Stone” and “Grass Stone,” the work is a jarring juxtaposition of Nature and the manmade. The most telling piece here is the delicate “In the Woods” whose narrative and imagery of isolation paints a childhood fantasy and a modern nightmare.

While this series brims with nostalgia, the third set embraces modern technology with its increased pseudo-digitization and the elemental breakup of its geometric shapes and forms. Former representational domes, spheres and organic masses are now disintegrating or reverting into streams of energy resembling arteries of flat diamond-shaped platelets in works like “Suspended Vessel I & II” and “Swarm.” All of which climaxes in the marvelous genetic maelstrom of “Construction/Destruction,” a wall installation of exploding digital DNA in cut paper, enamel and graphite.

Though Carlson’s work is an admitted comment on the “overwhelming state of technology,” Faulkner’s approach is even more direct in its social commentary even as it too, often has a nostalgic, ambivalent tone. In the previously mentioned “Background (Stripes)” the dated power point presentation with its image in three sections, its seams readily visible, mimics early Cinerama when one of its own three segmented images sometimes fell out of sequence reminding one of the “ghosts in the machine” that always haunted each techno innovation.

Likewise, one can’t help looking at Faulkner’s “HiFi Landscapes” with mixed feelings. Each lightjet print is a cleverly painted appropriated image of what at one time looked like the future of the urban landscape. In these futuristic paintings, Faulkner depicts an office building, a geodesic dome, a gas station and strip mall that despite their colorful modernity are already dated and falling into disrepair.

Yet nowhere is this ambiguity toward technology that unites this exhibit more relevant than in its showpiece, “American Still Life,” a four-panel installation of mixed media on wood, created by Faulkner in the center of the Underground. Each large hand-painted appropriated print is a slice of ‘50s Americana, when time stood still as a television landed in the living room for the first time and launched the Video Age with mixed reactions and results. The work is not deliberately didactic. Like “Vision/Re-Envision” itself, which proves painting is an illusion created by many tools, television, analog or digital, creates an image only as meaningful as those who wield and watch it.

Probably unintended, “American Still Life” has an additional irony. It depicts a time when families gathered together in one room, in front of one TV, and watched the same program, much as they did in front of the radio years earlier, rather than be splintered by a dozen different screens and earphones. Now, that is nostalgic ... and something to rethink.



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