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2005 EVENT SCHEDULE RUST HALL

SEPTEMBER 19 – OCTOBER 7
NANCY CHEAIRS:
DEPARTURE
Opening reception: Friday, September 23, 6-8pm

SEPTEMBER 26 – NOVEMBER 11
TAEA EXHIBITION

OCTOBER 10 – NOVEMBER 11
ANOTHER VOICE
Political Illustration Exhibition
Opening reception: Thursday, October 13, 6-8pm

OCTOBER 13
VISITING ARTIST LECTURE
Sue Coe
Thursday, 7pm Callcott Auditorium

OCTOBER 24 – NOVEMBER 11
ILLUSTRATION DEPARTMENT EXHIBITION

2005 EVENT SCHEDULE ON THE STREET GALLERY

431 SOUTH MAIN, MEMPHIS, TN 38103

OCTOBER 10 – NOVEMBER 14
ALUMNI EXHIBITION
LEAH JONES AND BILLY RILEY
Closing reception
Friday, October 28, 5-8pm

OCTOBER 28 – DECEMBER 9
MFA THESIS EXHIBITION

DECEMBER 19 – JANUARY 13
FACULTY EXHIBITION

Find out what you’re missing.

www.memphisflyer.com
Perfect: a group exhibition
September 17 – October 15, 2005
Opening reception Friday, September 16, 5–7:30 PM

Features contemporary abstract art work by thirteen artists who have each found a way to transform the familiar and mundane into the fantastic. Common objects such as road maps and product packaging have been reinterpreted as relics of everyday life through meticulous time-consuming modes of construction. Yet these objects are more than mere collages of process. Each one represents an attempt to manifest the complexity of an ideal—ess to make it perfect.

Samuel H. Crone: Answers and Questions
September 17 – October 15, 2005
Opening reception Friday, September 16, 5–7:30 PM

New discoveries about the life and work of 19th century Memphis-born expatriate artist Samuel H. Crone.

ArtLab. Nick Nelson: Memento
September 17 – October 15, 2005
An installation about the transient nature of human life by Georgia artist Nick Nelson.
Opening reception Friday, September 16, 5–7:30 PM
Artist’s gallery talk, Friday, September 15, 5:30 PM.

Red Thread: Visible and Invisible
"An invisible red thread connects those who are destined to meet regardless of time, place or circumstance. The thread may stretch or tangle but it will never break."
– The Legend of the Red Thread—Traditional Chinese Proverb

The Red Thread Project is a unique effort to draw together volunteers and creators for the creation of an artwork involving hundreds of interconnected, handmade hats. These hats will be worn for a group photograph/video on October 8 prior to being exhibited as part of "Red Thread: Visible and Invisible" exhibition of fiber art in the Art Museum of the University of Memphis, October 22 – December 17, 2005. The hats will be disconnected and donated to Memphis Love Caps and Ronald McDonald House in time for Thanksgiving distribution.

Knit a hat (drop off at the Art Museum or one of the yarn stores by September 21) and/or wear a hat at the performance on Saturday, October 8.
(Yarn stores: Rainbow Yarn and Fibers, The Yarn Studio, Yarn To Go, Yarniverse)

The Red Thread Project
A performance directed by fiber artist
Lindsay Obermeyer
Saturday, October 8, 2005, 10am
Dunavant Plaza
University of Memphis
(Directly in front of Academic Library)

Red Thread: Visible and Invisible
Exhibition of fiber art by Lindsay Obermeyer
October 22 – December 17, 2005
Opening reception Friday, October 21, 5 to 7:30 pm

Susan Lezon: ...that you may behold the moon...
October 22 – December 17, 2005
Exhibition at the art museum Thursday, October 20, time/place TBA, sponsored by the Institute of Egyptian Art & Archaeology.
Opening reception Friday, October 21, 5 to 7:30 pm

ArtLab. Brooke White: Passing Over and Through
October 22 – December 17, 2005
A video projection that addresses the importance of technology in the interpretation of landscape. Opening reception Friday, October 21, 5 to 7:30 pm

For more information: www.imusum.org or 901.678.2204
Museum open 10am-5pm, Monday-Saturday
Closed between exhibitions and University holidays.
Contents Fall 2005 Volume XIX, No. 3

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Business first.
The NUMBER board extends very special thanks to all those people who responded to this summer’s sponsorship invitation and generously sent CHECKS! Their names are listed in the masthead column. Don’t fret about being left out; NUMBER still wants you.

More serious business.
Presumably you are all keeping track of the art part of the Katrina disaster, but it is difficult to assess news reports. The best source at the moment is the American Association of Museums website, www.aam-us.org. Click on AAM Latest on the selection line at the top. The website includes museums of every kind, including art museums, historic houses, zoos, science centers and any institution that holds or exhibits collections.

The greatest losses appear to have occurred along the Gulf Coast. The Ohr-O’Keefe Museum in Biloxi lost much of its nearly completed spectacular new building designed by Frank Gehry. George Ohr’s “madly” beautiful pottery and Gehry’s torqued design promised to be one of the world’s most felicitous marriages of collection and container, before the Grand Casino, swept inland by Katrina’s tide, landed on the building. The collections, still in the old building, had been moved and are safe. The Pleasant Reed House, a museum of African American history, was also destroyed.

Reports from the Walter Anderson Museum in Ocean Springs have been confusing, because writers have not distinguished clearly between the museum and its collections and the Anderson family buildings and collections. Evidently, the institution and collections weathered Katrina, but family buildings in the compound were destroyed and the vault that held the family collections was inundated and the works severely compromised. Efforts are underway to save and conserve, but a great amount may be lost.

The condition of museums in New Orleans is varied. In general, collections held within the museums seem to have fared better than objects in off-site storage. The New Orleans Museum of Art is on relatively high ground and was not flooded. The greater fear was looting, and museum staff refused to vacate until a security force could guard the building and collections. The Ogden Museum of Southern Art of the University of New Orleans, a new and essentially vertical facility suffered no damage and no loss of objects. The Newcomb Gallery at Tulane, which has a splendid collection of American Arts & Crafts material, is removing its textiles, works on paper and ceramics, but there is concern about objects in storage in an inundated area. The Contemporary Art Center suffered some structural damage, but no further reports are available.

Considering the enormous losses of life, livelihood and property, the big question is how much the cultural institutions will suffer in the long run. Will their audiences return? Will their bases of financial support be diverted to the recovery effort?

Tennessee suffered no serious effects from Katrina, but several thousand evacuees are temporarily or permanently living in our cities and towns. The Tennessee Arts Commission is making its Special Opportunities grants available for arts organizations to receive amounts up to $500 for ticket subsidies to allow evacuees to attend cultural events. Check the TAC website, www.arts.state.tn.us, for guidelines and forms.

The TAC’s Governor’s Regional Conferences, annual events designed to provide management education to Tennessee arts institutions, will be held during October: October 13 in Knoxville, October 19 in Dickson, and October 28 in Germantown. The speakers and seminar leaders are a Who’s Who of cultural management experts in planning, development, community engagement—the nuts and bolts of successful operations. All the information is available on the TAC website.

We can only wonder if disaster planning might be a late addition to the agenda.

Look at the calendar. Whew! Much is happening, so get out there and take part in the art.

Leslie Luebbers
Leslie Luebbers is director of the Art Museum at the University of Memphis (AMUM).
Big Changes in Mississippi

Jackson

One of the most visible arts organizations in Jackson, Mississippi, closed shop last December, leaving Jack Kyle, executive director for the Mississippi Commission for International Cultural Exchange, to clean up the loose ends and pay the last bills for the decade-old organization in the wake of a $1.5 million deficit when the most recent exhibit closed in September.

One of those loose ends was tied up in a bow when Jackson’s mayor Harvey Johnson, in the throes of a re-election campaign he lost, announced that the lease on the space would be taken over by its next door neighbor, the Mississippi Museum of Art, on July 1, 2005.

Betsy Bradley, director of the Mississippi Museum of Art, noted that the plan to somehow expand exhibit space for the facility had been underway for quite some time — since a strategic plan had been developed back in 2003. “At the end of 2004, we got word from the International Cultural Exchange that they were not going to pursue another exhibition,” Bradley said.

That announcement led to conversations about the future home of the museum with the city of Jackson — which owns both the Mississippi Arts Pavilion and the building housing the Mississippi Museum of Art. Asked about the project just before he left office, Johnson had this to say: “The Mississippi Museum of Art has always been a great fit downtown, and as we are thrilled that we were able to work out this arrangement.”

MMA will begin renovations this summer, investing at least $2 million from state bonds in improvements to the Pavilion. When completed in 2006, the facility will open with a restaurant, sales gallery and exhibition, education and reception areas. MMA will continue to operate in its existing building until the opening of the new facility.

“This new facility and the investment the Museum will make certainly ties the cultural district together, along with the TeleCom Center, the Convention Center, and the Farish St. Entertainment District and all the other wonderful public and private investment that are occurring downtown,” Johnson said.

Each development Johnson listed in his statement was authorized, voted on, or funded during his two terms as mayor. Work on TeleCom Center, a concept developed when WorldCom was still based in Jackson and before news of massive accounting irregularities came to light, continues with a proposed opening date late in 2005. The Convention Center funding referendum passed in November 2004, with city residents increasing the restaurant and hotel sales tax by 2% to fund the facility. The Farish Street Entertainment District, a long-running project still a few years away from fruition, continues to languish while Jackson and Performa Entertainment, a private developer known for their work on Beale Street in Memphis, negotiate the details of the renovations.

While the announcement was welcomed by business and cultural leaders in Jackson, other expressed regret at the loss of Mississippi Commission for International Cultural Exchange, even as the MMA announcement was being made. Bud Robinson, chairman of was philosophical in discussing why the organization closed its doors after 10 years of exhibits: 1996’s The Palaces of St. Petersburg: Russian Imperial Style; 1998’s The Splendors of Versailles; 2001’s The Majesty of Spain: Royal Collections from the Museo del Prado and Patrimonio Nacional; and 2004’s The Glory of Baroque Dresden.

“Had we gotten attendance of roughly 350,000, we would have been fine,” said Robinson of the disappointing numbers for Dresden, the final exhibition in the series. “As far as exit interviews go, people were absolutely wild about it.” That sentiment didn’t show up in the exhibit’s box office; only about 133,000 visitors came to an exhibit that featured Vermeer, Rembrandt, Rubens, and Van Dyke. The show’s numbers left the organization with a $1.5 million deficit that is being covered by continued private donations, according to Kyle.

The failure of Dresden to attract the kinds of crowds that came for the first exhibit, The Palaces of St. Petersburg, was perplexing on some levels, Kyle said. “We had the highest quality of art but the lowest attendance in Dresden. How do you explain that?”

On the other hand, Kyle saw the low attendance numbers coming as early as the end of April 2004. Only $5,000-55,000 tickets had been sold, half what had been sold by the same point in The Majesty of Spain early in 2001. The ominous sound of the phones not ringing with calls from schools to schedule field trips was another early indicator of trouble ahead. Due to gasoline price increases, school groups — a mainstay of the early sales of past exhibitions — were cutting back. “The cost of gas and diesel has impacted their ability to take field trips,” Kyle said in May 2004, citing teachers and principals who had called him.

Glenn Sanford, owner of Southern Breeze Gallery in Jackson’s Highland Village, said that the exhibitions had been good in spreading the word about Jackson as a cultural destination not only for Mississippians, but other visitors as well. “In years past, we’ve had a lot of people who visited the gallery because they were in town for the St. Petersburg exhibit. I felt that it brought a lot of attention in a round-about way to Mississippi art. We sold paintings that are now in Alaska to people who came for those events.”

The total numbers for all of MCICE’s events speak for themselves in that regard. According to Kyle, about 1.3 million visitors came to the exhibitions over the 10-year period that the commission existed. The overall economic impact of that many visitors was one of the selling points that MCICE used to solicit funds from the Legislature. Mara Hartmann, manager of communications and public relations for the Jackson Convention and Visitors Bureau, said that the four exhibits staged by MCICE had a combined economic impact of $175 million.

Several governmental entities gave money to support MCICE exhibits — the Mississippi State Legislature appropriated $3 million each for the Spanish exhibit and the Dresden exhibit, while the City of Jackson donated funds for each exhibit through the Convention and Visitors Bureau. “We did give MCICE a sponsorship for each of the four exhibits,” said Hartmann. Was that a worthwhile investment? “Yes,” said Hartmann, “it was a good investment for the CVB because its educational and cultural attractions brought new visitors,
The critical factor in MCICE closing its doors after 10 1/2 years in Jackson was the reluctance of the state to continue funding exhibits. Kyle was fully prepared to mount a fifth show—he visited Europe in late October and early November of 2004 to continue negotiations for another event. But the state’s fiscal situation as viewed by incoming Governor Haley Barbour precluded any more support. “He, like the other legislators, didn’t see that the state could continue to do even the support in the past, given the fiscal condition of the state,” said Robinson. “You can’t do work of the magnitude and scale of exhibits like we’ve been doing without legislative support.”

“If it was a lucrative business, everybody’d be doing it,” said Kyle. “I was just going to be butting my head against the wall, and there was no point in my continuing it.” Kyle believes that the MCICE achieved many of its goals during its ten-year run, including educating the citizens of Mississippi in art from all over the world. “What we were trying to do here is cultural and educational, not necessarily entertainment,” said Kyle. “There are people in society today who don’t want that—but that’s all the more reason to present such events.”

“Some wanted us to focus on Mississippi and Mississippi only. We have Mississippi art museums and cultural institutions in the state to do that and have always been able to do that,” Kyle continued.

The role of the state in promoting MCICE events and the concept of a “downtown cultural district,” which supporters believe can be anchored by MMA for the visual arts and Thalia Mara Hall for the performing arts, have been footballs in local and state politics. The Dresden exhibit was criticized by many as a waste of state funds, as well as vilified for its focus on a German culture of the distant past. Talk radio callers sputtered about the nudes on display and wondered how Mississippians could support a display of German art, given that country’s stance against the war in Iraq. The vision of a downtown cultural district in Jackson has been used to argue for projects as diverse as the Intermodal Union Station project and ongoing efforts to renovate the old King Edward Hotel, closed in the late 60s and home to pigeons and vagrants ever since.

MMA found itself in the crosshairs of the political wrangling once it was discovered that the 2003 legislature had approved a bill that allowed MMA buy two lots in LeFleur’s Bluff State Park, located at the edge of Jackson’s border with suburban Flowood, for possible use in developing a new site for the facility. The prospect of MMA moving out of downtown so angered Rep. John Reeves (R-Jackson) that he amended the 2005 budget for the Mississippi Arts Commission to prohibit the museum from doing so. At the time, museum officials indicated that there were no immediate plans to move the facility to the Lakeland Drive location.

Reeves needn’t have worried, it seems, the recent announcement revealed how committed MMA is to the downtown cultural district concept. “This move enables the Museum to continue its mission: to attract visitors to a vibrant downtown Jackson, to display more of its outstanding collection of art from this state and beyond, and to educate even more children in the visual arts,” said Jerry Host, chairman of the MMA board of trustees.

At the press conference, the museum unveiled renderings which depict the new museum facility as the fulcrum of a downtown cultural district, extending from Thalia Mara Hall to the Telecommunications Center, including the Arts Center and offices of the Mississippi Opera, Mississippi Symphony, Ballet Mississippi, Davis Planetarium and the planned Capital City Convention Center.

The Pavilion offers many benefits to MMA, not least of which is a state-of-the-art climate control system, along with a loading dock, gallery spaces and double the square footage of the current building. Even though Bradley loves the ideas for the new space in the Pavilion, she mourns the loss of MCICE. “The Commission did a lot of good for this community. We always benefited when they had an exhibit in the building behind us,” Bradley said. “We are positioned to assume the mantle, so to speak.”

Julie Whitehead
Julie Whitehead writes about art and culture in Mississippi.
Nashville

Sculptor Alice Aycock will receive the first commission under Nashville's new “percent for art” ordinance, it was announced at a Metropolitan Nashville Arts Commission press conference on July 21, 2005. Aycock was chosen from a field of six semi-finalists including acclaimed public artists Ed Carpenter, Christopher Janney and Dennis Oppenheim. Speaking before Nashville’s Urban Design Forum, she described growing up around construction sites in Allentown, Pennsylvania and her natural affinity for abandoned industrial sites. The Nashville piece will be located on a former barge-building facility along the Cumberland River.

Although Nashville’s “percent for art” ordinance was passed in 2000, this is the Metro Arts Commission’s first public art commission. After several years of lectures by consultants and visiting artists acquainting the public with the idea of large-scale public art and a visioning process led by public art consultant Jack Mackie, a call for entries was issued in Fall 2004 soliciting proposals for the $250,000 award.

Coinciding with the announcement of Aycock’s selection, The Tennessean newspaper’s art writer jumped the gun with results of an “online poll” announcing that a majority of Nashvillians did not favor the proposed piece. How anyone could have taken an online poll before the first public mention of the sculpture remains a mystery. Nonetheless, the sensation-prone journalist managed (not surprisingly, given that the City is facing an unpopular property tax increase) to raise a hue and cry from a citizenry already skeptical about unorthodox uses for public money.

Aycock’s “Ghost Ballet for the East Bank Machineworks,” a 100-foot-tall by 100-foot-wide arrangement of metal components, is a group of connected parts whose visual allusions range from carnival roller coasters to the roving spotlights once associated with Hollywood movie premières. Elements will be mounted on two of the remaining gantry cranes once used for lowering barges into the river. Aycock hopes that the twisting and turning of the bright red ladder-like track reaching into the sky will bring a sense of excitement to the riverfront and also serve to reinforce “the confidence of a city that is comfortable with its identity as the home of American music and one of this country’s true emerging cities.”

Susan W. Knowles
Susan W. Knowles is a Nashville-based curator and art writer.

While Aycock’s piece contains no visual or aural references to music, several finalists’ projects did. Dennis Oppenheim proposed a giant self-playing guitar that would translate the natural music of the river into a song, and Christopher Janney offered a series of sound and light columns along the riverfront greenway that would create visual music in response to visitor presence. Instead, Aycock hopes to engage the public with her use of familiar industrial parts. She anticipates that they will work their influence purely from a visual standpoint, perhaps conjuring up an image of what was once a beehive of barge-building activity.

Music or no music, the massive scale of “Ghost Ballet” means it will immediately begin a conversation with the sweeping elliptical curve of the Arena roof, the large concave façade of Country Music Hall of Fame and the twin spires of the BellSouth Tower, a.k.a. The Batman Building — a great example of a once-ridiculed building that Nashvillians have grown to love.
Renaissance to Rococo
Masterpieces from the Collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art
Frist Center for the Visual Arts
May 20–August 28, 2005

Nashville

Renaissance to Rococo, a selection of stunning works from the collection of Hartford’s Wadsworth Atheneum, is the kind of exhibition that one expects to see at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts. Beautifully mounted and displayed by the staff at the Frist, this exhibition features paintings by Caravaggio, Goya, Anthony van Dyck, Hals, Lorrain, and Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, names well known to more than just the art history student or enthusiast, and these are not obscure works by the artists, but celebrated examples.

In an exhibition where so much is outstanding, it is difficult to identify a strongest area. However, one broad category is portraiture. Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun’s “The Duchesse de Polignac Wearing a Straw Hat” is stop-in-your-tracks stunning. A wonderful example of Rococo portraiture, the duchess is presented to the viewer in a traditional pose. Dressed in the latest fashion, yet looking delicately flushed as if she might have just dashed in for the sitting, the details make this portrait shine. In the hastily tied bow on her bodice, the horticultural accuracy of the flowers in her hat, and the precise detailing of the lace at her neck and wrists, Vigée Le Brun proves that she is just as good a painter as any of the boys, and perhaps better than most. Her image of strong femininity is a tour de force of the depiction of character.

Another compelling portrait found in the collection is of Joseph Cogmans, by Frans Hals. This work is distinctly Dutch, from the application of paint on the canvas, particularly in the delightfully highlighted individual strands of the subject’s beard, to the costume of the subject. Quite different in its intent than the portrait of the Duchess of Polignac, this portrait stakes a claim to greatness, not on the part of the artist but on the part of the subject. However, like Vigée Le Brun’s depiction of the duchess, Joseph Cogmans possesses a spontaneous feel. In this portrait, this feeling is accomplished through Hals’s sketchy application of pigment on canvas.

The smaller works in the exhibition are not minor. Although full of larger scale masterpieces, such as Bernardo Strozzi’s “Saint Catherine of Alexandria,” from 1615, and Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo’s “The Building of the Trojan Horse,” from 1773-1774, works such as Cornelis van Poelenburgh’s “Feast of the Gods,” from 1623, demand just as much admiration and attention. This excellently rendered work measures a mere 12 1/2 by 19 inches, yet it feels much grander in scale. Depicting the gods in drunken luxury on top of the clouds, it contains fantastic examples of foreshortening and a wonderful sense of spontaneity. The Caravaggio included in the exhibition, “Saint Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy,” from 1594-1595, is also on the smaller end of the scale, at least by Caravaggio’s standards, but is nevertheless an interesting example of the painter’s work. Its details are some of the most amusing parts of the picture; one is almost distracted entirely from the beautifully rendered figures of the angel and Saint Francis by the scene in the background, which would appear to contain a strange, robed figure and an abundance of pixies. It is easy to ascertain why the Frist chose this picture for its promotional material.

A commendable aspect of this exhibition is that the selections making up the Rococo portion were particularly strong and interesting for a period in art history typically thought of as the cotton candy of European painting. Noel Halle’s “Holy Family,” from 1753 is particularly touching, and it is also an indication of how far the depiction of religious subject matter had changed from the Renaissance to the Rococo. This painting depicts Christ as a toddler on his father’s lap, his mouth partly open as his mother attempts to feed him from a spoon. Although it recalls other works in the exhibition, such as Sisto Balalocchio’s “Holy Family,” of 1609-1610, the focus has determinedly shifted from dignified formality to charming intimacy. Renaissance to Rococo allows one to view the constants over a period of the art history and to identify adaptations pursued by artists in order to keep the subject matter contemporary and pertinent. For a small exhibition, it has a very large impact.

Natalie Harris
Natalie Harris is a masters degree student in art history at the University of Memphis.
The Inner Voice of Art: The Journey

MAX:2005
Art Museum of the University of Memphis
June 25 –September 5

Memphis

“Do artworks have an interiority? Can we listen to this voice, see its essence?” asked David Moos, curator of Contemporary Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario, in his call to artists for “MAX 2005: The Inner Voice of Art” displayed at AMUM late this summer.

To find art’s essence and voice, 23 local and regional artists included in this biennial collaboration between AMUM and Delta Axis sawed holes into gallery walls, hung fetishes inside hoop skirts, blasted canvases with infernos of color and energy and played songs from the Seventies. The exhibition’s layout showed us not only the fruits of the artists’ labors but also how they made the journey in.

Bill Rowe’s blue-on-blue neon, “Know Open,” hung above the entrance of the museum. This work’s Socratic wisdom, 21st century style, its word play and its triple-entendre directive were good introductions to a show about inner voice. “Come on in, we’re open,” it welcomed. Open up, wise up (know thyself).

Low rumblings at AMUM’s reception desk sounded like they came from deep within the ocean, the earth, the body. They did. Robin Salant’s audio synthesis of whales calling, icebergs cracking and humans chanting (“(ant)arctic”) and Billie Rowe’s cool blue neon invited viewers to go on a journey into mind and body. One of the most powerful stops along the way was Jean Flint’s evocation of “The Other Woman.” Twisted pieces of gray cloth wrapped with string hung like knotted intestines, turds and phalluses inside a hoop-skirt body. This bundle of guts and sexual parts may have been an invective, or a fetish concretizing Flint’s jealousy and rage. Beneath stylized notions of propriety (embodied in the 19th century hoop skirt), beyond a desire to wound or judge, Flint seemed to be trying to demythologize and understand. What she found deep in the body of “The Other Woman” looked like the fragile, gut-churning regret and desire of all humankind.

Search for inner voice took Alabama artist Amy Pleasant into spare, monochromatic space where tiny human figures dotted a 60-by-48-inch gray-blue landscape (“Casting,” oil on canvas). Most of the figures, created with two or three deft swipes of paint, looked down. Relative to their size, the distances separating them looked vast. Heads bent and cocked, nearly lost in shadow, the tiny forms appeared to be listening and remembering. Downcast? Casting about for their bearings or an idea? Cast off like a minnow in an ocean? Lonely and quiet as an Edward Hopper cityscape and disconcertingly powerful, “Casting” evoked a sense of vast psychological terrain.

With a voice that was both ancient and modern, Niles Wallace posed a mystery by entombing an object in the inner chambers of a polyurethane pyramid. Like the sphinx, the puzzle could be solved. We found the answer in the title of the work, “Level,” in the size and shape of the barely discernable object, and in the perfectly stacked and recessed rectangles. Inside the long, sleek slabs that looked like white marble steps leading up to a temple or monument,
Wallace reminded us that art’s essence is at the edge of our awareness and accessible when we pay attention and notice subtle details.

For Cedar Nordbye, inner voices are feelings and attitudes that can be excavated and understood. Nordbye sawed a 13-by-15-inch hole into the wall of the Egyptian Hall adjoining the main gallery. On the joists inside he drew pictures. Images that occurred to Nordbye as he carried out his “IEAA (Idea Excavation Architectural Analysis)” included a man sitting quietly in a yoga position, his body engulfed with flames, and an armored vehicle moving toward boxed letters which spelled out “MORE” and “MORAL.” Black ants marched across the bottom of the rough hewn wood. Nordbye’s dig into the inner voice of art and artists suggested that they are inflected with a complex array of factors – instinct, hard work, technological know-how, moral judgment and ideas so intensely held they may be willing to give up their lives for them.

Pinkney Herbert is an abstract painter, but the high-energy and high-key colors of his oil on canvas reflected some very real issues. In 90-by-72-inches of “Inferno,” white-hot yellows blasted through and melted down umber arcs, the last vestiges of architecture. This mesmerizing scene served a dual purpose. Loading on paint, slashing through it, and scraping back down to the raw canvas allowed Herbert to release some of the frustrations of 21st century life and to depict modern warfare’s total destruction.

The inner voice of art in Hamlett Dobbins’ current work is the voice of memory – how a piece of material felt in his hands, how a friend’s hair fell around her shoulders, how the emotional tone of a friendship changed. There were no literal representations of figures, objects, or landscapes in Dobbins’ 18-by-15-inch oils on canvas and linen. His visceral, emotional recollections were expressed with nuanced colors and surfaces so fully realized you could slip into one of the artist’s five small worlds, feel the globules of purple and blue roll across your body in “Untitled (for P.H.)” and dive further into “Untitled (for R.C.)” to reach that warm red glow that seemed to emanate from the depths.

Noted Atlanta assemblage artist, Radcliffe Bailey heard inner voice as “Joyful Noise” and covered 132-by-60-inches of wall with dozens of glass jugs and antique brass horns. Bailey’s joy was inflected with shadows. Museum lights shown through the narrow throated jugs onto the patinaed brass and created thousands of bronze and blue tinged aureoles throughout the assemblage and a large halo around it. Like his earlier multilayered collages that mapped out the black American experience with vintage photos and written phrases, “Joyful Noise” made some wry allusions to culture and history such as whisky from illegal stills and jug bands. Bailey’s voice beat out its own rhythms with enough jugs and horns (those mouthpieces that both wail and celebrate with fanfare) to make up a hundred bands.

In his life-size self-portrait (“#18609515020,” digital C-print,) Dhanraj Emanuel neither patriotically waved nor burned the flag he loosely held with his left hand. He looked up, perhaps hoping for a clearer vision than he was getting as immigrant “#18609515020.” His face was focused, searching, questioning. There was no anger nor pride in his expression, no threatening body language. Emanuel’s an immigrant from the Middle East who had been studying art


![Amy Pleasant, “Casting,” oil on canvas, 2005. Courtesy of the artist and Jeff Bailey Gallery, New York.](image2)
in Memphis, was at a cross roads. In his lifesize, transparent display of self, the artist was “the work of art” looking for its essence, its voice and for an idea worthy of artistic passion.

Christine Conley looked for art’s essence in paint chips. She pinned them like exotic insect specimens in a glass case (“Taxonomy of Leftovers”) and painted an image of one of the chips enlarged a thousand-fold (“Cornered,” acrylic on styrene). Conley bent the styrene at vertical center and hung the work in the corner of the Egyptian Hall adjoining the main gallery. Did the artist’s 14-by-24-inch painting of a chip she scraped from her palette or studio floor have presence and voice enough to stand alone? Created with every color on her palette (including limes, violets, burgundies, forest greens) and filled with the twists and turns that acrylics make as they ooze from tubes and are mixed and spilled, Conley’s painting “Cornered” us and took us for a complex, disorienting, garishly beautiful roller coaster ride.

In “A Line, a Journey” (watercolor on paper and hand-made paper cutouts), Keren Kroul went far into essence and worm-holed into a universe where evolution was a fanciful synthesis of Darwin and the transcendent. Kroul’s whimsical mix and match of phyla, geological time periods and designer colors made for some haunting images as lime green slime oozed off the arm of one figure and a huge reptilian tail snaked behind the back of another human female. For her contribution to MAX:2003, Kroul’s tiny cutouts played out a scene of anguish that looked like a Dantean Canto (“To Fly Away”). In this more recent 103-by-93-inch work, afterlife looked more relaxed, like another stage of evolution in which hundreds of naked, winged cutouts with sexual parts intact hovered close by, still processing evolution’s grand experiment.

Ian Lemmonds found essence in two figurines left on a window sill (“Untitled (Sill Horse),” 19-by-24 inch light jet print). Bright sunlight nearly dissolved the keepsakes and the curtain that hung lopsided in the window. Something about memory and minute to minute beauty asked me to pause and breath with the work for awhile.

Much like one of Barnett Newman’s large “Zip” paintings, Greely Myatt’s “Zip for Max” vertically sliced 5’9” of monochromatic space. But Myatt’s color field was AMUM’s gallery wall, and the line that divided it was a real zipper. Myatt plastered his readymade into the back wall of gallery A and placed a fluorescent light behind it. This functional, lighted zipper had much to say about a sculptor’s process, Myatt’s wit, and his impact on students, for example, gesturing and cutting through space, defining parameters, incubating an idea and bringing it to light and opening up the minds of others. The zipper’s 5’9” length, Myatt’s exact height, also evoked a sense of an artist opening self with each creation.

Gallery B, the room on the other side of the wall that Myatt was unzipping, was filled with the artwork of Virginia Overton, one of his former students, who also turned functional objects into multilayered metaphor. Overton’s installation, “Hot Child,” played tricks with time and space. An antique phonograph perched on a large yellow pedestal sat inside a 12-foot industrial tube suspended from the ceiling. The slightest movements, including setting the needle onto the 1970s hit record, “Hot Child in the City,” torqued the tube. As we slow danced with the cylinder, moving in and out of its path as it circled the room, the quality of the sound of the pop tune and our relationship to space altered. Mischievous and metaphysical, “Hot Child” looked like the answer to the Zen Koan, “What is the sound of time moving through space?” created by a mind that professor Myatt helped to unzip.

For “My Special Day, Week, Month” Amber McGregor put on full wedding regalia each morning last February. She videotaped herself in white-on-white gown with train trailing behind her as she shopped and ran errands. McGregor talked with people along the way and clarified her feelings regarding ritual and relationship, deciding what parts of
tradition she would carry on and what she’d discard as excess baggage.

The Max 2005 artists dug deep into art and life. Human nature is complex, their works told us; life is ambiguous and its joy is inflected with pain. Some of the art asked tough questions (about country, about self) and took us deeper. Much like the hero in mythologist Joseph Campbell’s cross-cultural studies, the artists fought inner dragons and trekked perilous terrain. They discovered that art is everywhere — throwaways, in vast expanses of mind, on a windowsill, within gallery walls and pyramids, and in the way light imbues color. Other artists who layered insight with humor provided the exhibition with wit and wisdom. Myatt unzipped walls and shone some light on the matter. Overton played with space and time and reminisced with a hit record from the seventies. McGregor put her wedding dress back on and rethought her attitudes about commitment and tradition. Remember that sassy, sexy, untamed mind-set of young adulthood? Curator David Moos and these artists know: when you listen and go deep into art and life — the essence and voice you discover will be your own.

Carol Knowles
Carol Knowles is a Memphis art writer and critic.
Gregory Crewdson
Twilight
Frist Center for the Visual Arts
May 20th – August 28, 2005

Nashville

In the exhibition Twilight, on view through the end of August at the Frist Center in Nashville, Gregory Crewdson invited the viewer into a very strange, yet oddly familiar domestic realm. The artist is noted for the cinematic care he takes in rendering his images, as well as his obsessive attention to detail. Nancy Cason, the associate curator of the Frist, compares him to Sam Mendes, director of American Beauty, and David Lynch, the director of Mulholland Drive and Twin Peaks. These comparisons are apt, although the comparison to Lynch is closer to the mark. Crewdson’s fascinating images seem deeply suspended in a kind of alternate reality, a reality that due to the often larger than life depictions, is difficult to take in at all once, and therefore easy to miss completely. His pictures present snapshots strange dichotomies, but, while their arresting aesthetic and theatrical qualities invite the viewer to participate actively in looking, the images are only as complex as the viewer’s investment of attention allows.

The most successful in this exhibition, oddly enough, are the two that are least overt in their presentation of the bizarre. “Untitled (boy with hand in drain),” 1999, offers a scene of domestic curiosity enacted in a bathroom. Due to the large scale and design of this image, it is easy to overlook the bottom of the photograph, which holds the most intrigue, and establishes the subject matter. While the top two thirds of the work presents an unsurprising suburban setting, the bottom third of the work is cast in an eerie green light. It has the look of a neglected fish tank with a broken filter, mossy, wet and slightly in motion. There is nothing but decay. In his act of reaching down the drain, the boy’s arm has taken on similar sinister qualities; the arm no longer belongs to the boy, but to a cadaver. The meaning of this reaching is unclear. The Frist ventures an explanation, because of the artist’s interest in Freud. But, much like focusing only on the theatrical element of these works will yield analogies to particular films, a Freudian interpretation seems too simple.

The second work from this series that piques one’s curiosity due to its benign nature is “Untitled (pregnant woman in pool),” 1999. This image, at first glance, appears to be the most straightforward of the group. However, much like “(boy with hand in drain),” the normalcy of this image falls apart in the details, specifically the way in which the artist utilizes light. The scene itself is straightforward enough, with a Magdalene-like woman standing in a blue plastic wading pool, attended to by a woman who might be her mother. A tree stretches over her, framing her in the middle of three arches formed by its branches. In the background, houses glow with warm golden light. To the left of the woman a youth lies on the ground in a position that is almost fetal, surrounded by toys and covered only by a towel. The woman, clothed in a white sundress, contemplates her burgeoning belly as shafts of light pour in from the right. These shafts of light, much like those in “Untitled (sleepwalker),” 1999, call attention to themselves for two reasons. First, it would appear that this scene takes place at the moment right after twilight and just before darkness, making their presence illogical, and second, they highlight the woman’s form, making her dress become transparent, revealing her ripe form. Unlike “(sleepwalker),” however, these shafts of light seem quite sensual. They sexualize the moment, and yet they also call attention to its purity. The dichotomy of this image is puzzling, and, like (boy with hand in drain), demands that the viewer look at it more than casually.

The one criticism to be made about this exhibition, it is its placement. Located on the first floor of the Frist, in the middle of the Renaissance to Rococo exhibition, it is distinctly out of place. Casual patrons of the Frist, coming in to see a selection of beautifully depicted saints and society figures of the Renaissance and Rococo, or the sweetly painted little girls of Renoir were a little too challenged by the Crewdson installation. More often than not, visitors made a quick sweep of the contents, a circle of the room at best, and then moved away in bewilderment. Evidently, this ambivalence was anticipated by the Frist, as visitor information on the exhibition was quite thorough, and contained one of the more thoughtful and extensive explanations that I have seen for an exhibition that is not the main event. Even if the explanation of the works was a little too Freudian, the Frist must be given credit for showing work that made unusually strenuous demands on its audiences.

This body of work is impressive. Fetishistic rendering, sumptuous coloration, and dramatic staging all suggest that these images were meant to provoke looking, to provoke voyeurism, as Cason rightly points out in the accompanying essay. One sees echoes of Cindy Sherman’s Untitled Film Stills from the 1970s, and the curiosity of the surrealist photographer Man Ray. Nevertheless, for their beauty and obvious aesthetic accomplishments, it is difficult for the viewer to understand the aim of the artist or the point of the works themselves. In the end, one can only come to the conclusion that the enigmatic feeling created by these images is an integral part of how they are viewed. What is going on? What are we supposed to be looking at? What is important? The artist effortlessly raises these questions without giving an answer. The brilliance of these images is their elusive nature.

Natalie Harris
Natalie Harris is a masters of art history student at the University of Memphis.
On Others

University Art Gallery, Sewanee: The University of the South
August 19–October 9, 2005

Clough-Hanson Gallery, Rhodes College, Memphis, TN
October 21–December 7, 2005

Irongate Studios, Austin, TX
January 13 – January 29, 2005

Sewanee

On Others, a traveling exhibit curated by Greg Pond, assistant professor of art at The University of the South, makes connections among a group of artists: Patrick Deguira, Melody Owens, Jack Dingo Ryan, Steven Thompson and Pond himself. Engaging a wide-ranging discourse on the politics of identity, civilization and the natural world, “On Others” is the result of successful creating, packaging and marketing.

Pond envisioned the exhibit as “…the tightest show possible without having to be a “real” curator. I’m not a curator by profession. I’m an artist.”

In “Objects Possessing an Historical Past, That is Renewed By the Present and Persists Without End,” Pond sets two identical miniature single-track trains face to face to compliment and confront one another. This dialogue is reiterated in the mirrored windows and doors. Psychologically speaking, the mirror image reveals the unconscious to the conscious, bereft of the protective armor of the personality. “Objects” lays bare the secret that “the house on the hill” is a tenuous cultural construction futilely attempting to hold the irrational chaos of the natural wilderness at bay. “Sugar Candy Mountain: The Final Resting Place of Saint I,” consists of rivulets of audio wires leading to mountain peaks of aluminum matrices. Tiny speakers are interspersed along the inclines while small branches sprout upwards and burst into blooms of artificial flowers. “Sugar’s” composition is punctuated by the interplay of artificial materials and their natural evocations. Pond’s sculpture reminds us that man’s utopian impulse toward artifice and technology is also an expression of the natural world. The title of the piece calls to mind the Harry Haywire Mac” McClintock song “Big Rock Candy Mountain,” and Pond’s use of a godeling Bruce Springsteen on its audio track conjures the everyman’s yearning for the song’s hobo Paradise.

Pond’s big-picture point of view is complimented nicely by Patrick Deguira’s more intimate work. In “Precarious Stack,” Deguira stacks 20 green teacups into a tower balanced on a crimson volume of “Joy of Sex” that is in turn sitting on a plain white chair. Although the eponymous precariousness of this piece lends it an immediacy that captures attention, this unease quickly gives way to the realization that, of course, the structure is not about to topple. Deguira’s recent work is concerned with parents and domesticity. In “Stack,” he is able to reflect opposing points of view: the sometimes vague and fragile nature of family and home and the assurance that these are our constant, most dependable connections to the world and ourselves. Likewise, in his “Untitled” piece – a quotation in orange acrylic that states “Come in…I want to hurt you!”– Deguira presents the dichotomies of voluptuous invitation and hidden threat implicit in the human urge toward intimacy.

Arlyn Ende, director of the University Art Gallery at The University of the South, feels the traveling show is part of a trend among entrepreneurial artists, “Is there any other profession you can think of in which the individual has to do everything for themselves?” Her interest in On Others came from her feelings that “we live in such a materialistic and martial culture. I feel like we are totally absorbed with the self. Thinking about others subverts this whole idea.” The underlying political implications of her observation are on display in Melody Owen’s work.

“The collages are about both the encroachment of one society upon another and the encroachment of civilization upon the natural world”, explains Owen in her statement. Owen uses images of the United States, Canada, the Middle East and Russia appropriated from the scholastic social science encyclopedia Lands and Peoples. In Owen’s puzzle-like compositions, East and West entwine in complimentary embrace and constricting threat. Disparate juxtapositions force the viewer to make decisions regarding figure and ground, becoming aware of the participatory nature of realities, both political and personal. Her use of a schoolbook as source is a deft comment on the learned nature of patriotism, racism and xenophobia.

Hamlett Dobbins, director of the Clough-Hanson Gallery at Rhodes College in Memphis, will be hosting On Others in late October. Acknowledging the difficulty of juggling the logistics of a traveling show, Dobbins points out that most gallery spaces have “…no storage and up to two years advance booking. That really puts a damper on it…” Greg did a really good job of working with me and Sewanee on dates.”

With “Deerstalker Hat,” a green, fur-lined hunting cap with fuzzy earflaps, Steven Thompson explores the human impulses that lie behind the mythic fictions of the pioneer. Thompson’s sense of humor is evidenced by the fact that the tweed, British cap associated with Sherlock Holmes was designed by Henschel Deertalker. Thompson’s titular pun calls attention to the human process of “trying on” different identities, beliefs and values as we search, like detectives, for the “right fit.” Both “Deerstalker” and “The Aegis of the Green and Bold Cooperative” – a stunning full suit of cloth and leather armor inspired by Homer’s “Odyssey” – remind us of the ritual capability of a costume to bestow characteristics and powers upon the wearer.

In his statement, Jack Dingo Ryan notes that “at the root of my ideas is an interest in the human experience.” His sculpture, “Skull Shelf” consists of an upright human skull balanced on a white shelf facing the wall. Visitors must ascend a spiral staircase and walk to the far side of the gallery’s balcony to view it. Ryan’s lively skull refuses to represent death and rejects any number of necrotic clichés, bringing to mind the buoyancy of memories and the endurance of experience and evoking notions of perpetuity and timelessness, “Skull Shelf” can also be seen as a fossil from one of the avatars Ryan employs in his exquisite drawings: “Unabomber” Ted Kaczynski, or the empty space of his landscapes.
Memphis

The work comprising Hamlett Dobbins's exhibition, *Early Morning Paintings,* conjures that particular time of day with all the richness it offers. The residue of dreaming recedes as the first stirrings of impulse and obligation sharpen. Worldly matters impinge upon private reveries. One moves between these states of consciousness, in touch with both.

There is a sense of improvisation and elaboration in these sumptuous paintings. "Untitled (For NJP (orange)," 2005, begins with an irregular grid painted in luminous tones of orange and olive. Dobbins next paints an incrementally brighter orange pattern of varying spheres, adapted in size and shape to the array of spaces created within the underlying grid. On top of this, seven fidgety curvilinear shapes have been lifted out of the established pattern by over-painting selected areas in an altogether different palette of cosmetic pinks. The pulsating amber background of the painting, and the pink shapes floating above it, feel like disparate worlds, an intimate past colliding with an icy pop present. Flat rectangular shapes of olive and black cluster at the edges of the pink shapes; these read as tabs physically connecting the foreground shapes to the background. Or alternately, they suggest aerial views of newly sprung-up building developments, emblematic of modern life.

A dialogue about binary relationships runs throughout the work: deliberate and playful, natural and synthetic, old and new. Dobbins is a collagist in his synthesis of diverse material, commonplace and invented, to form a personal whole. This is particularly evident in the small paintings, such as "Untitled (For MRM & E)," 2004, in which two layers of chunky shapes, articulated in blue and then orange stripes, hover on top of a complex mosaic-like background, evoking bits of cloth or children's sweaters. And yet the visual language of the paintings, self-generated because each layer forms a distinct response to the preceding one, is essentially abstract. Indeed, when regarded in a temporal sense, the imagery becomes increasingly abstract and contemporary as one moves through the layers of each painting, traveling from the inside out.

As physical objects, the paintings are quite compelling, drawing one in and rewarding a close viewing. These are richly layered and varied surfaces; where some areas are smooth and shiny, others are built up layers of light colors dry-brushed over dark, the paint accumulating in sensual nubs on the weave of linen. Dobbins's color sings with a wide range of expressiveness, running the gamut from subdued to vibrant, cool to hot. Dobbins can paint masterfully, and he clearly loves the process, stirring up all the pleasure and desire inherent in painting.

Interesting connections with painters, past and present, spring to mind when viewing Dobbins's work. First is the Austrian painter Friedensreich Hundertwasser (1928-2000), both in a formal sense — rich color combined with intricate patterning also predominate in Hundertwasser's paintings — and in connection with the surrealist automatism with which Hundertwasser was associated. Something akin to Hundertwasser's idea of "Individualfilm," in which each individual possesses a wealth of memories, sensations, and images that can be brought into consciousness through art, is present in Dobbins's composing process. A more contemporary connection is with the abstract painter Thomas Nozkowski, with whom Dobbins shares characteristics of painterly modesty, inventiveness and a permissive approach to decision making. Hamlett Dobbins is cultivating a particularly fertile area in painting, one which grants a great deal of room for movement in drawing from what has come before and what is available to him now.

Also on view was an exhibit of J Ivcevich entitled *Crate Digger — A Musical Meditation on Vinyl Inspiration.* Recently relocated from Atlanta to Brooklyn, Ivcevich has been active as a DJ, in addition to painting, and these works are rooted in music culture. For this exhibition, Ivcevich presumably searched a great many crates to cull inspiring album covers, which he then reinterpreted in multi-layered paintings made of digital photographs, resin and acrylic. The process of painting between layers of resin produces a good deal of spatial illusion, and the result is a collection of restrained and seductive paintings. While the musical choices appear to be random, viewing the pieces encourages memory games as the dots between album covers, music and personal associations are connected. Accompanying the paintings are two wall-mounted wooden turntables and original signage in the form of a large record painted on the wall. This work makes one ponder source material and content, about how much has been created and is already at hand, and the potential for art making in collecting, sampling and recycling.

Carrie McGee
Carrie McGee is a Nashville artist.

Hamlett Dobbins, “Entitled (for M.R.M. and E.),” oil on linen on panel, 10 x 10” 2006. Courtesy the artist and David Lusk Gallery.
Texas Medicine
Jay Etkin Gallery
June 24-July 9

Memphis

When Bob Dylan sang “Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again” and mentioned “Texas Medicine,” he was referring to something a little more potent than drink. Johnny Taylor, a Memphian and shining lone star, lifted the songwriter’s words to name his recent show at Jay Etkin Gallery. This exhibit expressed a vision that, through a medium of signs and recognized symbols layered over primary colors, evokes the otherworldliness within the realm of ordinary things. Tempting the viewer into hallucination, Taylor’s bright renditions evoke an aura of the unreal stamped and posterized on the collective consciousness. His paintings are a mind-altering substance.

Taylor was born in Helena, Arkansas, in 1971. A Delta background is in part the probable influence for his palette of vivid colors: sky blues, fire hydrant yellows, hibiscus reds, Nehi orange, watered grass green. Such resplendency lights his paintings much in the way vibrant color schemes drench and frame buildings and brick wall murals in the Deep South. Encountering one of his works, the viewer is promised of possibility. Bright reds, stark whites, verdant green, and one of Taylor’s trademark colors that can only be described as minty fluoride, define the typewriters and elevate them from the redolent yet somehow muted background.

What is suggested by such a pop culture-esque rendition is the process of painting or of artistic selection itself, in this case writing too, that the artist must locate and recast upon the tabula rasa of a canvas. What the painting delivers is a haunting metaphor that the viewer not only senses with the eyes and mind but feels in the gut. It’s no coincidence that the piece is titled after a Joycean trope that refers to the flow of the collective unconsciousness, as evinced in wordplay, from one generation to those who will follow and flow after.

Taylor’s work is a fusion of post-modern, Pop Art, and neo-folk, with a heavy dash of psychological signifiers thrown in the mix. His influences range from Basquiat to Warhol’s serial photography is also a point of perspective. Taylor’s paintings play on the viewer’s subconscious interpretations of advertisements, graphics unfolded at MTV speed, comic book illustrations and the poster-like quality of collecting cards. There is something Tarot-like about his paintings that one almost wants to refer to as prints or imprints. His process speaks of subtle irony; through these symbols and techniques he is actually attempting de-logoization. Rather than selling meaning through the accumulation of random signs, his collections of icons force the viewer to think about how meaning is ultimately construed in favor of the unintentional, serendipitous nature of the artistic gesture rather than that of the insidious marketing we are immersed in on an hourly basis.

Taylor takes such pop culture icons as soda bottles and light bulbs, lines them up on checkerboards of vibrancy and allows the viewer either to knock them down in a desire of carnivalesque pleasure or to align them with deeper intent. In what he calls “happy accidents” inspired by Duchamps’ mode of quasi-unintentional selection, Taylor’s juxtapositions simultaneously eschew and foster heady, intellectual interpretation in a playful way. His vision explodes mundane objects and transmogrifies his canvases (sometimes planks of wood) into something more visceral and immediate than mere surrealism.

Although his style owes much to Basquiat, as he will readily admit, Taylor, even more than his famous mentor, is obsessed with signs and signage and the concept of the signature. With his random assemblages of symbols—Victrolas, barcodes, the Pisces fish, or a young girl with a meditative rictus, who turns out to be the Morton salt girl—he is fascinated with the immediacy of tagging or marking a visual language that is as anonymous yet personal as a work of graffito. The aim of the graffiti artist is always random, and in a sense, authorless. Graffiti is a form of subtextual urban discourse: bold visual images combined with a written/painted tag in some uncannily recognizable but undecipherable hieroglyphic. This type of gesture is much akin to Taylor’s objective—the deeply personal cloaked in what is ultimately very public.
Taylor’s *ars poetica* results in bold imagery, alphabetic renderings in the context of brightly painted free space that itself is infinitely interpreted by sub-commentaries, and projected echoes that suggest a manic form of doodling. Taylor’s paintings have the effect of beginning a visual conversation that is pure stream-of-consciousness, pointed and counter-pointed, ebbing, flowing and eddying toward drowning out the ordinariness of the subject matter while seducing the viewer to respond via muscle memory. The overall sensation is almost one of perceptual mysticism.

In the painting entitled “Ghosts of Electricity,” light bulbs, which are in fact representations of the idea of light bulbs, are demarcated in bold, black marker-like lines that contrast with the quilted background above which they seem to float as in a disembodied production line. Squares of red/blue/green/orange suggest windows or further canvases of interpretation. The piece seems to be a metaphor for the “great idea” or the ubiquitous self-consciousness that an Edison would participate in to achieve the idea of the great invention. It is the thing itself, das *dingedichte* of poetic fancy that Taylor portrays and redefines in a glowing, Blake-lit allegory.

Taylor’s paintings call for a large audience to maintain the visual/visionary subconscious conversation going. Susan Sontag’s well-known words come to mind in considering the recent dosage of Texas medicine: “Fewer and fewer Americans possess objects that have a patina, old furniture, grandparents’ pots and pans – the used things, warm with generations of human touch, essential to a human landscape. Instead, we have our paper phantoms, transistorized landscapes. A featherweight portable museum.”

Johnny Taylor’s paintings respond to such a notion and refute Sontag’s critique of the mainstream. He proves that such phantoms, in the hands of an artist, unbound by the laws of gravity and contextualization, can paradoxically hold much weight and meaning. Art that is truly emotive and de-logozed by visionary preoccupations stamps itself into the recesses of the mind. Like abstractions we assign to be typewriters, roosters, or signs of the zodiac, Taylor’s own vocabulary of images, re-interpreted and highly patina-ed, is nothing less than essential, recognized, felt and known, and, like all memorable works of art, brilliantly and endlessly portable.

*Philip Kobylarz*

I was in tears by the time I reached the freeway returning to Memphis, after viewing The Fragile Species: New Art Nashville. And no, not because I hated it. The exhibition — its themes of transience and vulnerability, the thoughtfulness of the selection and layout by curator Mark Scala, his obvious passion and outspokenness regarding the region’s artists and, most of all, the work itself — is mesmerizing, offering an entry into raw expression, impeccable craftsmanship and heartbreaking sincerity. Ruminations on the brevity and fragility of life, aging, emotional distress, the assault and deterioration of the body, lineage, in many case, intimately drawn from personal experience, dovetail seamlessly with concepts of the body politic, of sustainable infrastructure, of shared ideals and fears along with the benefits of community.

During a June Podcast from the museum, Scala remarked that over the last five years, he explored the city’s “ad hoc” alternative galleries, guerrilla exhibitions, secret shows and “one night stands” (www.sitemason.com/site/b3q1uw). The Fragile Species reflects the enduring impact of artists working under the radar: a decade or so of Untitled events, Don Evan’s happenings, the Switchyard exhibitions at Zeitgeist Gallery, shoebox spaces like Ruby Green and Rule of Thirds, bombed-out artists studios like the (condemned) Fugitive Art Center and no doubt many others. The exhibition rightly acknowledges the resourcefulness and determination of contemporary artists to uphold a consistent presence in the region. The DIY attitude and autonomy (and a little rivalry) of these grassroots initiatives endow a particular vibrancy and momentum to the art scene, what Scala calls “a very interesting moment in the life of Nashville,” if a tenuous one.

“The infrastructure that comprises the art world in Nashville — which includes artists, of course, and galleries and commercial entities; it includes the idea that art criticism is important — all of that is very delicate. People leave all the time; people come all the time. What does it take to make Nashville, in artists’ minds, a place that is really worth committing oneself to?”

Vulnerability and ephemerality are at the heart of “Especially Considering Exposure” by Barbara Yontz, a skirt and blouse fashioned from onion-thin and lucent pig intestines, the sort commonly used as sausage casings. The garments are suspended by thread at the darkened entrance to the exhibition; slight to the brink of evanescence, light passes through them delineating every wrinkle, fold and hem. Dangling there like a specter ensnared in cobwebs, they evoke the tincture of a dank attic, the venerable elegance of sallowed lace, the dissolution of memory and the ravages of time.

Several artists create works referencing their own physical and emotional afflictions. The paintings of Carol Mode, “Haunted” and “Wave,” bear a passing resemblance to Gerhard Richter’s pulled and folded abstractions, but they are in fact representative of her degenerative eyesight, where “intra-retinal hemorrhages” cause her to “see planes and veils of atmosphere, interrupted by ‘floaters,’ small dark spots that move around the field of vision.” The writhing and ruptured torso of “Use It” by Erin Hewgley, cast from her own body, makes reference to the rape she experienced years ago. Isolated upon a low pedestal, the artist vented all of her spleen, as the ghastly object emanates anguish, fury, desolation and horror.

Jack Dingo Ryan’s installation “Blood and Guts Forever” is an array of hundreds of cast doll ears, densely gathered where two walls join, then dissipating in scale and frequency as they radiate in either direction. The artist has gradually lost his hearing as a result of otoscierosis and says that this work is a “visual metaphor for my isolation that occurred slowly over a period of years…my loss of hearing seemed to be more of a receding into my own head, a private world. I was interested in the distortions and revelations, the magic, brought on by isolation.”

I first encountered the work of Kristina Arnold attending her exhibition Infectious at Ruby Green in 2003, an installation inspired by her background in research at Vanderbilt’s Department of Preventive Medicine. Her contributions to The Fragile Species likewise draw upon that experience, but whereas her efforts a few years ago were certainly monumental, if somewhat overwrought, this work is concise and devastatingly beautiful. “Drip” is composed of an arrangement of multiples, each a ruby-red glass drip emerging from a translucent vinyl packet pinned to a freestanding wall, while a metal basin of...
water at its base casts shimmering reflections among the cellular forms.

Lain York is a longtime fixture of Nashville’s art scene, not only as an artist, but as a member of Fugitive and the gallery director at Zeitgeist. York is tireless in his zeal to promote artists in the region. York’s own paintings resemble spirit masks, particularly of African origin, and in the past, I must admit being perplexed at this appropriation. But his canvases here, “Fing” and “Riprap” move away from mimicry, to embodying a good dose of spirit in and of themselves. The masks are abridged and undifferentiated to the point of apparition, yet imbued with certain power by the frenzied and intuitive handling of paint.

This only scratches the surface of this phenomenal exhibition, which includes the excellent work of Michael Baggarly, Patrick DeGuira, Kathryn Dettwiller, Kristi Hargrove, Emily Holt, Mark Hosford, Andrew Kaufman, Adrienne Outlaw, Leslie Patterson-Marx, Billy Renki, Julie Roberts, Chris Scarborough, Victor Simmons, and Tom Thayer.

The associations of the human body — its beauty, complexity, health and well being — to that of society is an unmistakable subtext of The Fragile Species. Scala is to be applauded for his willingness to broach so plainly the subject of resources and access in Nashville’s burgeoning art scene, saying “the community of artists is itself a fragile entity that benefits from support. And without that, without acknowledgement, without appreciation, it could very easily go away.”

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MFA Thesis Exhibition: Kathleen Moore,
November 7-November 16
Reception: Thurs, November 13, 4:30-7 pm
Holiday Art Sale Friday, November 18, 9 am-7 pm
MFA Thesis Exhibition: Ashley Chavis,
November 28-December 9
Reception: Thursday, December 1, 4-6 pm

Southside Gallery
150 Courthouse Square, 662.234.9090 www.southsideoxford.com
Jere Allen (paintings) and Keith Fondren (mixed media, sculptural paintings),
September 25-October 29
Opening reception: Thursday, Oct 6, 6:30-8:30 pm
Rodd Moorhead (sculptures and paintings), and
Landy Mangold (photographs), October 31-December 3
Opening reception: Thursday, November 10, 6:30-8:30 pm

Nº 55 January – March 2006
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