What’s new in art in the New Year? Altogether, it appears that some worrisome tendencies in art in the public domain are accelerating.

Late in 2005, Fisk University, Vanderbilt’s historically black institution of higher learning, attempted to obtain permission from the Tennessee Chancery Court to sell the two most valuable of 101 objects from the Stieglitz Collection given to the university in 1935 by Georgia O’Keeffe. Fisk’s $20 million Hirshhorn buildings project, New York University and Marsden Hartley’s “Painting No. 3” could be sold up to $30 million. However, among the stipulations of the gift were that the university could not sell or sell any of the works. In the worldwide museum practices, selling or “deaccessioning” is the equivalent of ethical quicksand—put your toe in and you might be sucked into a deadly mess. So far, public reaction ranges from sabotage to sympathy for the university. Fisk is a small institution with a strong endowment and one increasingly valuable asset, the 1935 Stieglitz Collection of Modern American and European Art. If Fisk were a museum, deaccessioning would be ethical. But if the work was damaged beyond repair, a new duplicate of another work in the collection, relevant to the collection or if the institution was unable to care for the work, the last is one of Fisk’s claims, and evidence supports it. An additional ethical requirement is that proceeds be used only to enhance the collection. The principle behind these restrictions is that the objects are given in the public interest and that the public should receive additional support through replacement of lost dollars dedicated by the donor. Therefore, resources are custodians of public property, not owners. The same should be true of non-museum nonprofits institutions holding art objects in the public interest, but the idea is under attack.

Fisk isn’t a museum, and following in the path of New York Public Library’s recent sale of the iconic “Hundred Springs” painting by John H. Sargent, it is alarming, except only from deaccessioning rates, but from the original condition of the gift. At least Fisk is being open about the plan and the reasoning behind it, more than can be said for 100%, who sold the painting for $22 million in asylums to one of the Wallonians, thus removing it from the public domain. Fisk will use the proceeds, estimated at $180-200 million, for capital improvements, endowments, and to provide a safe environment for the remaining 99 works in the Stieglitz Collection. The Chancery Court approved the sale in December, but in January the O’Keeffe Foundation might claim that the sale would void the entire gift and argue for its return to the late artist’s estate, the State of Tennessee’s Attorney General filed papers on January 28 to enter the case in the interests of keeping the Stieglitz Collection in Tennessee.

Lots of legalese and dangerous territory. But it’s not a cliff-hanger yet, since the hearing is set for October. Meanwhile, in Oxford, Mississippi, Chancellor of the University, Robert Khayat, has delivered a high-handed slap in the public face by substituting for a poetic memorial art project about the University’s integration, initiated by the public, selected through a public process and funded by public contributions, with a pedagogic design solicited from an architecture firm. Susan Knowles has the story in this issue.

More uplifting news from Memphis. Lantana Projects, discussed in those pages last year in an interview by Hamlett Dobbs with Lantana founder and director, John Meeder, has formed a partnership with the University of Memphis FedEx Institute of Technology for a residency program to bring new media artists to create works in conjunction with research scientists in biotech, nanoscopy, artificial intelligence and other fields. The first artist-in-residence is James Clar, a graduate of New York University’s Interactive Telecommunications Program, who studies and works with light in the design of information systems. Although his career is young, he has shown work internationally in art museums and galleries and in design exhibits. Information is available at lantanaprojects.org, and Number will have an article on Clar’s work and experience in Memphis in the next issue.

Help keep up the good work of the Tennessee Arts Commission, which is one of the nation’s most successful and generous state agencies, by participating in Tennessee’s Arts Advocacy Day on March 7 in Nashville. The morning program consists of updates on pending legislation that impacts the arts, and the afternoon is spent with legislators discussing those issues and even that may be pertinent to specific organizations. For online information and registration, go to Tennessse for the Arts website at www.tnarts.gov.
Civil Rights Public Sculpture Chosen in Competition Succumbs to President’s Preference

By Susan Knowles

The events of the past three weeks prompt me to write this letter. Since your swift rejection and replacement of my Civil Rights Memorial project entitled “Forevermore” seems to be a foregone conclusion, I write as a last ditch attempt to convey to you my reasonable decision. Should my letter of November 1, 2005 fail to make its mark on you, this document will be for the sake of posterity, so that when others hear my thoughts and know where I stand, first, I feel it essential to chronicle the facts.

When I received the IOC Memorial Project proposal in 2001, I felt that my personal experiences of having been born into a segregated America in 1935 and having integrated all white Alcorn A&M (now Alcorn State University) in Mississippi, Virginia and Pennsylvania, led me to conclude that it is imperative that the Civil Rights Memorial at the University of Mississippi’s campus reflected the history and the events taking place in that part of the world. The events of the past three weeks prompt me to write this letter. Since your swift rejection and replacement of my Civil Rights Memorial project entitled “Forevermore” seems to be a foregone conclusion, I write as a last ditch attempt to convey to you my reasonable decision. Should my letter of November 1, 2005 fail to make its mark on you, this document will be for the sake of posterity, so that when others hear my thoughts and know where I stand, first, I feel it essential to chronicle the facts.

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In Memphis, in 2005, local and regional artists reached new levels of maturity and acclaim. Their masterfully executed works evoked mystery, reflecting the history of European and American art from the 50 years of painting and sculpture. They have created one of the most interesting visualizations of modern art in the Mid-South.

In November and part of December, five southern artists explored the gamut of awareness (probably the 16th century mystic, Saint Teresa), many of whose paintings were evocative and mysterious. In their masterfully executed works evoked mystery, reflecting the history of European and American art from the 50 years of painting and sculpture. They have created one of the most interesting visualizations of modern art in the Mid-South.

In January, the Republic of Tea became the arena for a powerful exhibition titled “Sabe Lewellyn’s Oil Paintings.” The exhibition challenged and enriched our notions of God and Godliness. In what could have been an expression of ecstasy, rage or a call to action, a bare-chested David clenched his fist, pointed his finger heavenward and covered (“The Beheading of Jesus, 21, 1940”), Lewellyn retold the crucifixion story. Engels, Marx and Lenin were there. Stalin as the Judean, slaver still in mind, turned away from Lenin to the Christ figure lying on the ground. Frida Kahlo, as a Mary Magdalene who knew much about suffering and passion, covered Trotsky’s foot. Here was a social revolutionary, youthful and challenging the power brokers and advocating the sharing of wealth, and an all-encompassing light (empty gallery walls will never look the same again). At the far back of the gallery, the reflecting pool and the slow moving clouds transformed ARCO into a Japanese Serenity Garden at midnight where we could experience what Gikun has described an “unnameable and mind in one ever-flowing movement.”


Coleman Coker, “Parts Seen Within the Background of the Whole,” installation.
Jeff Mickey and Bobby Spillman play well together. Of their collaborative effort, Mickey claims, "It’s like walking into a giant comic book." This assessment is not far off the mark, though the interaction between painting and sculpture takes on a more three-dimensional feeling than that of a comic book. Perhaps a comparison to a pop-up book is more appropriate.

Spillman’s whimsical, animated works interact on a stylistic and structural basis with Mickey’s rustic, stylized works. Together, the two artists create an environment that allows their art to project off the walls and interact with the viewer. The art is sparse and clean in its linear qualities, yet it also creates a sense of quietly controlled explosion. The art is, above all, environmentally driven, both in the relation of the works to one another and, of course, to the space in which it is housed.

The two artists pull out different aspects from one another without seeming to be driven too much by the need for coherence and unity. Opposed to contrivance, their collaboration seems effortless. The point dynamism in Mickey’s sculptures is reflected in the gestural style of Spillman’s paintings. The structure of the space is reflected in the interaction of Mickey’s ladders, which also appear in Spillman’s work, as do Mickey’s small wood house structures, a motif that appears so often in his work that they could be considered his trademark.

The thematic relation, movement, and interplay of these objects make for a unique viewing experience. Interaction is a key element to these works. It appears at times that certain works have been conceived in tandem, such as Spillman’s “Sweeter Homes and Gardens” and Mickey’s “Epicenter.” This is contemporary art that doesn’t try too hard, yet is still retains its efficacy. It is an intriguing combination of minimalist forms and pop sensibility, reminding one not only to notice one’s surroundings, but also to take a certain pleasure in them.

If there is a down side to this exhibition, it lies in its aesthetic quality. The exhibition is a beauty to behold, almost teetering on the edge of becoming too pretty in the manner of wallpaper. The saving grace lies in Mickey’s interactive sculpture, “Escape.” The unexpected dynamism of the work, the way that it interacts with Spillman’s “All Day Everyday” and “The Morning After,” the noise it creates, the active and the unexpected interaction of the viewer, reminds one that this is, in fact, an exhibition in which the artists conceived of their work not just as pretty objects on a wall. In the end, the emphasis on community not only encourages the viewer to consider their relation to the community of works, but also to the community at large.

Natalie Harris
Natalie Harris is a graduate student of art history at the University of Memphis.
You Are Here
Ruby Green Foundation
October 21–December 5, 2005
Nashville

The postcard announcement for the exhibition You Are Here at the Ruby Green Foundation in Nashville promises an “14 contentions. “locale” or “topographical placement” as tangible
put forth in their statements regarding the continued exis-
tence of “place.” Our sense of “where you are” has been removed from the search
for “post-geography, “ it is not.

Three works by eighteen artists, some in collaboration, are
included sound, Barbara Yontz’s “You are There, Like My Skin, “
as an image brought to mind a photographic negative with its
shadowy gradation of lights and darks, and it stood formally
as a foil to the work directly opposite, Anderson Williams’
image. Ganjin, who was sent to Japan to reform Buddhism. This
Thai mulberry paper of the 8th century blind Chinese monk,
Richison’s work refers to the notion that such a sense of
“place” is fateful and often linking in its effects.

While Means’ sound component was at the central part of the
viewer, Barbara Yontz’s piece, “You Are There, Like Big Silks, “
featured a local fashionist on the floor, facing a 4” x 7”
grid of square object made of hog intestine, thread and
wax, with a series of voices asking, in various languages,
questions along the lines of, “I told I love you, would you say you love me too?” Although I tried to simply “think
about the sounds of words,” to ignore the fact that,
within an era not quite as spacious as my bathroom, I was being asked to endure two competing sound loops, it was
difficult to suppress the temptation to pull the plug on the
“Speakers of Love” (the artist’s description, not mine).

Yontz’s commitment to tug into their primary material
of late was most successful in the recent show at the first
the informational binder that the video was capturing the
footage became vintage security camera style, but mobile,
as we approached the Mobil gas station. Once inside, the
content, further dismantled the “post-geographical”
aspect of the press release. Entitled “There She Goes,” the
3:35 minute video loop included imagery of an aircraft passing
through the sky, accompanied by engine noise and people
laughing, or perhaps crying, as the imagery shifted from
trees, to a sky plane, and back to trees. It was revealed in the
informational blurb that the video was capturing the
dropping of an individual’s ashes from a plane at a location
of particular importance to them.

In sum, hitherto have been prevented as a vehicle for display
recent works by several members of the faculty at Atkins
College of Art Design and their friends and colleagues from
the Cranbrook Institute (by my count, at least nine of
the artists either attended or taught there), the exhibit might
have lived up to its billing. An informed and aesthetically
significant investigation of temporality and the era of
“post-geography, “ it is not.
Three Paths to Abstraction
Ewing Gallery of Art and Architecture
November 17-December 16, 2005
Knoxville
Three Paths to Abstraction features recent work by three mid-career Tennessee artists who have dedicated their careers to abstract painting. Pinkney Herbert, Whitney Leland, and Carol Mode approach the genre in very different ways.

Pinkney Herbert’s gestural, animated canvases evoke an old-time blacksmith’s shop, where fire and water collide at the hands of an experienced craftsman. Most of his paintings emanate a red-hot interior light and bear fitting titles like “Cauldron” and “Firefall.” Sonts and full-bodied gestures of brushwork and splatters, more restrained (though no less active) marks are made by the artist’s own fingertips, removing thick, oily layers of paint to reveal luminous glazes beneath. A different color palette emerges in works like “Waterfall II” and “Veil,” where sodium greens and opalescent oranges spill across the canvases like fountains. Herbert’s high contrast, energetic paintings evoke the elements in a primal way, but they are by no means simple.

In contrast, Whitney Leland’s monumental paintings exploit control to an almost obsessive degree. Vertically oriented canvases feature flat ribbons of color that fold over themselves seemingly at random, but never casually. His surfaces are impeccable. Hundreds of transparent layers of acrylic glazes build up to form milky whites, fiery reds and oranges and deep cool colors submerged in gloss. Though similar, each painting has its own personality proving that consistency does not have to be boring. Look all you want, but don’t try to find hidden content here; these paintings are all about themselves.

Carol Mode gives us a set of paintings built out of an assortment of floating squares, circles, and other components that repeat themselves across surfaces of vibrant, smeared paint. Her work is less cohesive Herbert’s and Leland’s, but it benefits from a healthy range of diversity. Each painting exists on its own built out of a struggle to find a balance between organic and geometric forms and shifting planes of space. The constant in her work is a sense of history created by compounding layers of thick and thin paint in patterns that flow across the canvases. If the artists share anything, it is a passion for color, and lots of it. Except for one black and white monochrome by Herbert, vibrant hues seem to be required parts of each artist’s formula. The show is bright, but not sugary, which takes some skill.

The exhibition will travel to the Fine Arts Gallery at Vanderbilt University in Nashville February 9—March 16, 2006 and the Art Museum at the University of Memphis June 24—September 9, 2006.

Benjamin McKamey
McKamey is a recent BFA graduate of UT Knoxville and a co-founder of Three Flights Up Gallery (threeflightsup.com).

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Burnt Toast
David Leonard
Alpha Pop Press, 2005

“Is this a photograph?” So begins a Commercial Apprentice review last June by Fredric Kaplan of several photography exhibitions, including “Selected, Renounced, Almost Neglected” by David Leonard. The thesis regards the long shadow of William Eggleston and scrutinizes the burgeoning outlooks, including “Selected, Resurrected, Almost Forgotten.”

Kaplan’s apt phrase – numerous second-rate gold-brickers endeavoring to jump the maestro’s train. Leonard, however, is not among them. Burnt Toast, a limited edition (150) volume of 64 laser prints, dotingly hand-bound by the artist, contains numerous of the same images exhibited last summer. Along with 2004’s Real Pretty Sauls, a catalogue to the exhibition at Rhona Hoffman Gallery in Chicago, this edition elucidates Leonard from the subcategory of being simply an Eggleston clone.

Leonard’s work, of course, bears obvious signs of “Bill’s” admiring impact (the artist cites Eggleston as a longtime mentor and friend), most notably in off-the-cuff compositions, retouching, and a childlike responsiveness to whatever is before him. And yes, that includes southern culture, enlisting that refined, antebellum sublimity with its lush greenery, ravishingly flooded sunsets, and small, idiosyncratic churches. “Church of Christ – southern Virginia,” is captured in the pitch of night, a humble little country A-frame smoldering softly beneath a blanket of moonlight.

A wise teacher once told me that the way to move beyond the scope of originality is to embrace influences ferociously, rather than resist them or attempt to submerge them. Thus the artist most sincerely, and expeditiously extracts whatever nugget of wisdom and conjectures to his own practice. Leonard are not the one-offs regularly spotted in the beautiful photographs of other acolytes, say Pape Foote or Christian Patterson, not merely homage, but relate an indelible manner of seeing the world and chronicling experiences.

A phenomenal cure lollipops before a row of computer terminals, pedestrians slowly mimiculating with matches and blinking lights, for “personalized analysis booths South Fair, Memphis.” The image, like that of the previously mentioned church, is attuned to the irony and absurdity – the diagnostic emptiness of the woman in contrast to the pageant of pepper blues and vivid pinks. One can almost smell the taffy and corndogs or hear the shrieks and laughter of thrilled children.

For many years, Leonard has worked as a cameraman and grips in motion-pictures, which lends a distinctively cinematic flair to his photographs. “Burnt Toast” draws a delicate arm of a woman dexterously placing a fork down (or perhaps lifting it), as ribbons of light and shadow delineate her graceful contours. As in other photographs, the image is bathed in sunshine and likewise chopped a rose, vestigial of a woman, in a rose meadow. The image is lusted in sunshine and likewise diffused in the foreground, effusing reverie.

Over the white hats of spectators to a rodeo and at the bull beyond, entering the frame from the left and blurred into a murky silhouette, such that one is not initially quite certain which direction the bull is facing. Again, Leonard’s intuition is seamless, as the hats populated on the bottom edge of the frame – their crisp light and azure shadings evining every crease, pinch and wrinkle gone – hold like contemplative sutures in a bag, and above them the atmosphere melts into evanescence.

These photographs stir fictions, not in the sense that their subjects are contrived or staged. They are rather passing glimpes, little fragments of things that must be pondered in the sensibilities and imaginaries of those who engage them. For an artist statement, Leonard says, “It is all about perception: the way we see and the way we see the world. And it’s different for all of us…I can’t quite make you see anything just as I do, nor do I want to. You could tell me something you saw in a picture of mine, or something you felt, that I never knew about. I love something you saw in a picture of mine, or something you felt, that I never knew about. I love this. The pictures have a life of their own. If they deserve to be good, then they probably prove themselves in the ways that we make them our own.”

Leonard is a dyed-in-the-wool Memphian and his work sizzles with the independent and idiosyncratic spirit that is the hallmark of its artistic heritage. Even in the photographs from Europe and outside the south, one cannot help but sense his Mississippian bearing – shaped by its music, literature, food, plenty of beer and cigarettes, friendships with artists on the fringes like Charlie Miller, Jimmy Corr, the late Dan Zarnsdorff, no doubt many others. Eggleston too.

And there’s nothing wrong with that.

David Hall
Bull in the Commercial Apprentice and others


David Hall
Hall in Burnt Toast, courtesy of the artist

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Grand Lobby, Hot Springs Convention Center

Paintings Remain on Exhibit Through March 2006
The exhibition, with works stacked two and three deep on its walls, shows no apparent organization, nor a definite stopping or ending point, which makes initial navigation of the material difficult. This could be due to the space in which it is housed, which is little more than the lobby of Rust Hall in the middle of Overton Park, or to its display. Signage is an issue as well; the wall tags are stacked one on top of the other like the works, and the type was small and difficult to read. Their order did coincide with the works’ placement on the wall, so some organizational steps were taken. Nevertheless, for the viewer, the absorption of this material is most definitely limited by its presentation. Beyond issues of display, there were those of content. As previously stated, there appears to be no organizing principle, an aspect that really takes away from the aim of the exhibition. The dates, 1981-1999, are also offered with no explanation. For the casual viewer, this exhibition could be a chronicle of the Reagan, Bush Sr., and Clinton presidencies as easily as it could be about the run dates of the publication. Thus, with so little guidance, the viewer is left with little other choice than to examine the works on a stylistic basis. There are some lovely pieces in this exhibition, such as Glenn Wolf’s “Lethal Dose” from 1986, in which striking eyes peer out at the viewer from a stippled haze. However, the majority of the works inspire speculation on the value of such an exercise, the making and display of political art. In viewing this show, one can’t help wonder about the ability of art to speak in a political language. The aim of course, is certainly worth pursuing; however, in most attempts, such as Marshall Arisman’s “Torture” from 1994, the artists appear to be trying too hard to make a poignant statement. This image, in its attempt to make a point, is completely undermined by the artist’s overt attempt to shock. Likewise, images such as Ralph Steadman’s “Nuclear Scare” from 1986, his “Stairs of Liberty” from 1987, and Steve Boardman’s “Clinton’s Missile” from 1998 and “Fill ‘er Up” from 1991, lose ground due to their overt use of humor. The failure of other works is far more subtle. David Arismann’s “This Side” from 1987 is undermined by the artist’s attempt to take the focus away from his obvious skill as a draftsman. This work is named by the artist’s political statement, a childishly applied poison sign. One can only speculate about the potential for the work to speak to its subject if the artist had removed stylistically, applying his statement with the same finesse shown in his Mucha-esque rendering of mother and child. If there is a saving grace in this exhibition, it may lie in its great weakness: its directionless nature. These works do inspire one to look closely at what is displayed; however, it seems plausible that if one did not have a reason to do so, this exercise wouldn’t actually be undertaken. These works then become precisely what they were not meant to be, a covering for a wall, easily passed by.

Natalie Burns
Burns is a graduate student in art history at the University of Memphis.
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