

Exhibit Features Powerful, Energized Groupings

Written by Steve Banks

Tuesday, 31 January 2006 18:00

The current exhibit at Quad City Arts shows that sometimes a house is not just a house. Running through February 17, the exhibit features four artists whose works are often energized by their context. The frame of a single residential structure plays off – and draws meaning from – a different piece featuring 15 similar structures, for example, while the distinctive portraits of another artist resonate because of the collection of portraits.

This show brings together four artists: the creative sculpture duo V. Skip Willits and Kristin Garnant, along with printmaker/educator William Howard and painter/educator Timothy Waldrop (the latter two from Macomb). It includes etchings, manipulated prints, and painted visual constructions, all balanced by bold steel sculptures and delicate wire-based works.

It was just November when Skip Willits and Kristin Garnant displayed work out at the MidCoast Fine Arts Gallery at the Mississippi Valley Welcome Center in LeClaire, yet they have managed to have an entirely different body of work on display here. Their playful themes can still be seen in works such as *Man on the Pole*, but the move from a more intimate space to this larger one seems to have invited a more overtly serious – and political – undercurrent as well.

There is an interesting art equation to be seen between the piece *House* and *The 9th Ward*. *House* is a wire construction of a shotgun-style house with the visual feel of a three-dimensional line drawing. It is a succinct and simplified form that isn't overburdened with detail and visually functions for what it is supposed to represent: a house.

By comparison, *The 9th Ward* is composed of a tight grouping of 15 shotgun homes (three headstone-like rows of five houses) constructed the same way as *House* but resting on top of a raised plexiglass base.

The resulting interaction within the grouping of 15 is different from and far more energized than just 15 times the single structure; *House* is not a can of soda pop to the *The 9th Ward's* 12-pack. *The 9th Ward* is outstanding visual shorthand for an impoverished and dilapidated, densely packed neighborhood.

While *House* is a full piece in its own right, it also functions like the legend on a map to help decipher the meaning within *The 9th Ward*. *House*, with its solitary intimacy, helps to proclaim its physical form to be seen more as a home — the distinction being that a house is a generic building that somebody else lives in, but a home is the personal space that *you* live in. By making that personal connection, the single piece *House* allows the grouping *The 9th Ward* to resonate with a vacant sadness like an empty playground. I journeyed to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina;

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The 9th Ward

captures the quiet despair and decimation that is ubiquitous in the streets.

Willits' and Garnant's *Thief of Baghdad* is composed of two sets of bed springs overlapping and perpendicularly intersecting to form a large T, with a wooden crate resting upright on the floor directly beneath. There is plenty of internal activity for the eye between all of the thin and irregularly coiled rusty metal and the thicker, calmer bands of the actual frames. Unlike the title *The 9th Ward*

, organically woven into the heart of the piece, the title

Thief of Baghdad

seems to be assigned at the end of the creative process, much like a hand-printed name tag stuck on your shirt. There is a socially and politically rich reservoir – some might say mine field – of ideas tied to Baghdad right now, but in relation to the kimono-shaped

Thief of Baghdad

, the connection eludes me.

Printmaker William R. Howard's predominately black-and-white multi-plate etchings of people explore identity (and lack thereof) as individuals, groups, and individuals within groups. The images are not a visual documentation, but more of a visual construction by the artist, who selectively accentuates aspects of identity within each portrait – such as highly detailed hints of zippers and pockets as well as seemingly incongruent letters and textures – while subduing, obfuscating, or eliminating others. With great effectiveness, he utilizes the same sensibility with facial details – which range from unknown to the viewer but distinct, to intentionally smudged beyond recognition and without identity – yet all convey some sense of personality. Their overall feel is reminiscent of some of the photographic assemblages of British-born artist David Hockney, who would construct a single large image from hundreds of smaller component images that each focused on a detail within the whole picture.

Most of Howard's images are energized by the vibrating tension established between the slightly disconnected squares of richly textured visual information and the subtle grid-like pattern from the edges of the plates left as a result of the printing process.

Howard's piece *12 People* is a polyptych comprising 12 similarly sized, individually framed black-and-white etchings of various people in casual frontal poses. The soft and grainy dark-gray and black tones give a lifeless quality to the people and unnerving edge to the pieces, like old 19th Century photographs of killed outlaws posed upright in pine boxes.

Because it is a grouping of 12 individuals (instead of 11 or 13), Howard might also be referencing other groupings of 12, such as very specific and individual disciples, individual jurors who must function as a group, and the mass-produced cans of a 12-pack.

By having 12 people, Howard taps into many possibilities for metaphor – such as our relationship with the divine, our roles within society, or even the willing commodification of our lives. But he seems reluctant, in both his artist statement (which deals primarily with technique) and the finished piece, to delve into any deeper ideas; this is a group of people who just happen to number 12, it would seem.

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Howard makes his exploration of identity clearer in *The Crowd*. This roughly three-foot-by-five-foot etching showcases two guys, fuller in detail, the front-most one clad in Bermuda shorts, T-shirt, and sandals, and the other recognizable (but less detailed) figure wearing dark shorts and a T-shirt with glasses on. Most of the detail on the secondary figure is dark and suppressed, except for a band of heightened detail that encompasses his right arm and a swath of his shirt.

Surrounding these two are wisps and linear fragments of several other incomplete figures – revealing enough visual information to be read as a head or a face and supply the fullness of a crowd without eliciting any extra attention. Their appropriate lack of detail pushes them into the background. What is so strikingly successful about *The Crowd* is its visual representation of the nature of casual observation where certain people or details cross the barrier into conscious recognition, perception, and remembrance in a nearly random fashion, while other details, names, or people dissipate into a perceptual haze.

Whereas William Howard reconstructs slightly fractured images, painter Tim Waldrop forges disparate images together within individual works to construct a new whole. While the soft and splotchy blacks and warm browns give Howard's work the illusion of texture, Waldrop's various painting techniques – such as sanding, scraping, and painting on nontraditional materials, give his work *physical* texture.

While technically two separate pieces, *Summer* and *The Gathering* explore similar subject matter and benefit from being hung in close proximity. The three-panel

Summer

shows three casual silhouettes, the green and white woven pattern of lawn furniture that leaves that nice waffle pattern on thighs at picnics, and reddish/pink ketchup-like blobs on a tablecloth-like fabric pattern.

Directly below *Summer* is the four-panel piece *The Gathering*. In it we see three yellow silhouettes on a white background facing forward – one with a patch of red in its chest – a heart-shaped blob on a pink background, two empty white lawnchairs contrasted against a slate-gray background, and a plaid tablecloth pattern.

The titles collectively sum up the two works as a summer gathering. Interpretations of the red blob being heart-shaped and the empty lawnchairs signifying absence or loss are prompted more by the artist's statement than by the works themselves.

Waldrop's artist statement goes to some length trying to explain how these gestalt images explore social conditions, family traditions, relationships, and health issues. While this might be the stated intent, it is not necessarily the visual result. Yet Waldrop's mastery of paint and his sense of compositional structure certainly outweigh any perceived disconnect with his artist's statement.

Waldrop seems to absolutely soar when he moves away from his statement and just delves into the actual inquisitive and playful process of painting. Waldrop is one hell of a good painter as evidenced in both the piece *Front Porch* and even moreso in *Pause* (coincidentally two pieces

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that seem to adhere even less to the artist's statement).

In the moody *Pause*, we see an orange and red male figure emerge from a mass of rusts and vermilions, which are both thrust forward by a dull mint background. His left arm – which is mostly obscured by the stark geometric pinkish table – is described by a flurry of red, violet, and ochre strokes. His legs, which we can see emerge from under the table, are similarly described with paint. (Waldrop's handling of paint within the interior of human forms is similar to the noteworthy Bay Area figurative painter Nathan Oliveira.) The figures behind him are reduced to large and effective blobs of reds, which help anchor the man in place and provide a lonely ambiance to the setting. The artist's smart use of color and brushwork successfully convey a reflective and weary exhale at the end of a long day.