

## Agriculture Binds Excellent Show

Written by Johanna Welzenbach-Hilliard  
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Iowa's agricultural abundance, natural landscapes, and teeming wildlife are themes that tie together the work of Iowa artists Larsh Bristol, Douglas Eckheart, and Brian Roberts, currently on exhibit at Quad City Arts in Rock Island.

Bristol, a nature photographer, is currently working on a documentary of the commercial fishing industry on the Upper Mississippi River and includes several Mississippi River photographs in this exhibit. His work is pleasant, though not outstanding. His photograph *Circle of Water Life* is one of his best. Using magnification, Bristol has caught the simple, graceful beauty of a flower bent over touching the water as if kissing it. The picture is colored in sepia tones that give it a gentle, nurturing warmth. Two of his river pictures *Red Sky in Morning*, *Sailors Take Warning*, *River Sunrise* and *River Sunset Reflections* are striking images of sunrise and sunset with good color (pink, red, and gold), composition, and contrast.

Although his still-life photographs are good, I think he excels at capturing wildlife in motion. *Spring Nesting Search* is almost ethereal. This image shows a tiny island of bright green trees in the middle of steely gray water surrounded by a soft mist. A splendid eagle soars overhead the trees, searching. In *Flight of the Egret*, Bristol gives us a magical moment in a spectacular close-up of the face, feet, wings, and tail feathers of this gorgeous bird. *Egret Ballet* and *Great Blue Heron* are equally lovely, catching the elegant lines of these magnificent waterfowl.

He has a few photographs, however – *Backwater Maize*, *Storm Over the Mississippi*, and *July Green* – that, though pretty, are rather mundane in comparison to his dramatic wildlife pieces.

Douglas Eckheart paints Iowa landscapes in bright oils. His style verges on primitive, with his simple lines and his use of bold colors. In his artist's statement, he says, "My work should not be considered photographic realism," and he encourages the viewer to interpret his paintings as "visual poetry." Eckheart's strength lies in his simplistic paintings of rolling, tree-lined hills and farm fields. I like how he uses different color schemes for each farm landscape.

Eckheart uses his artistic license by painting with almost garish colors (deep purple) in such pictures as *Harvest Aglow*. In *Near Sabula*, he uses rich autumn yellows, golds, reds, and greens to depict the lushness of fields ready for harvest, and trees bursting with foliage. He changes mood in *North Buena Vista* by using verdant green and earthy brown, and pale turquoise for the sky.

While his strength lies in simple landscapes, Eckheart's weakness lies in his attempts at

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riverscapes that include mechanical objects and man-made structures such as boats and bridges. These paintings just don't have the overwhelming sense of joy that his brilliantly colored landscapes evoke. Although his crude sketches work beautifully in his farmland scenes, the same crudeness looks amateurish in his paintings of these more industrial subjects. In addition, his panoramic riverscape, *Pike's Peak Vista*, lacks the depth and diversity of color and subject matter found in his other paintings.

Brian Roberts is a sculptor heavily influenced by his agricultural background. "Through the creation of my artwork, I link with my family's farming roots," he writes in his artist's statement. "I investigate the seeming irony of some biotech seeds being sterile. I embed my perceived consequences of this incongruity into images of agriculture's symbol of abundance and fertility, the granary."

At first glance, I was not sure how Roberts' large sculptures made of corrugated steel, metal spikes, bolts, and banded wood reflect his philosophy of the irony of "sterile seeds" stored in "fertility vessels," but I liked them anyway. Indeed, the more I examined them, the more I began to see how the pieces could be vessels, albeit lumpy, heavy, ferocious-looking vessels.

My favorite of his sculptures were *Twin*, *Crib*, and *Been*. *Twin* looks like a large hollow egg split in half and joined by a hinge. Roberts uses dangerous-looking pitchfork spikes (curving upward) attached to a thick wooden frame to create this threatening egg shape.

*Crib*

has a gentler aspect than

*Twin*

. Using the same form and materials (but a metal frame instead of wooden one), it is only half an egg, without the spikes.

*Been*

, by its symmetry, shape, and metal ribbing, reminds me of a giant Trilobite fossil. The sculpture is a lovely mixture of wood, sheet metal, and curved iron rods. It is powerful and graceful, even lyrical.

Roberts' piece *Hopper* is imaginative. A large, lop-sided, gourd-shaped container made of sheet metal with a small mouth covered by metal teeth, it provokes the image of a seed unwilling to sprout. How could a tender shoot make its way through those sharp steel ridges?

*Trough*

amused me because it looks like half of a seedpod (split lengthwise) out of

*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*

. A heavy metal frame supports a wooden spine and ribs that are encased in chicken wire. I saw seeds in Roberts' work, but I couldn't quite visualize the granary.

Although I appreciate each artist's work individually, I don't think that they go together particularly well. The oil paintings and photographs are both uneven representations of the artists' talents. Some of Bristol's and Eckheart's pieces are very attractive and technically accomplished: These complement one another. Others, however, are mediocre and lessen the show's impact.

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Also, I think both Bristol and Eckheart could have put more effort into their presentation. Frames are accessories meant to enhance a work of art, and these pieces need enhancement. Eckheart definitely could have used some colored frames to add a bolder aspect to his vivid paintings, and Bristol needs to get away from using black frames on sepia prints – too dark.

I enjoyed Roberts' sculptures very much, but I don't think they blend with the more static, traditional artwork of Bristol and Eckheart. Roberts' work is strong enough to stand alone.