

“One Step Beyond What I Know”

Written by Steve Banks
Tuesday, 02 May 2006 18:00

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A tall, enigmatic pyramid constructed from a series of stacked cubes stands perched on the balcony, a silent witness to the comings and goings of the travelers below. The pyramid's surface is covered with patches of colored sheet metal riddled with snippets of old advertising and logos. Each cube's facet is a small composition in its own right. The fragments of pop-culture detritus of the ziggurat's skin beg to be organized and deciphered, but yield no clear message. This pyramid, entitled *Fibonacci's Ziggurat*, is just one of several reconstructed realities by Terry Rathje in MidCoast Fine Arts' first solo show at the Mississippi Valley Welcome Center in LeClaire. Fueled by his insatiable curiosity, Rathje's work is a constant exploration of the dynamic possibilities that can be unearthed by juxtaposing various materials and trying to wrangle them into a new visual paradigm.

In Rathje's pleasingly concise artist statement, he explains his inquisitive mindset and approach to creating work by saying, "I am out to rearrange reality. I spend half my time taking it apart and learning about it and the other half putting it back together and learning about myself ... that is what keeps it interesting. It's always one step beyond what I know." The simple eloquence of his statement carries through into his work.

Rathje has a profound ability to transform mundane objects into new visual realities while still leaving enough evidence of their previous identities to add to their overall interpretation(s). An excellent example of this is *Photoscenic*, in which Rathje has constructed a southwestern "pop" landscape with scraps of printed and embossed metal.

Although the technique in *Fibonacci's Ziggurat* is similar to what takes place with *Photoscenic*, the license plates and old metal signs in the latter are more freely allowed to add their original identities – of travel and commerce in a 1960s/Route-66/roadtrip sort of-way – to the landscape.

While the physical form of the ziggurat is referenced, its historical usage is mostly ignored. The ziggurat traditionally is a tomb for someone of great importance, and metaphorically, the higher something climbs on the pyramid, the more importance it has. Yet in *Fibonacci's Ziggurat*, the metal acts as an interesting visual covering, yet it adds little meaning.

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In *Illuminated*, we are presented with a slightly rusted rectangular tower crowned with a doughnut-shaped, internally illuminated frosted-white halo or aura. In its center is a smirking ceramic head mounted on a small shaft. The tower and the white ring, which is a booster seat for a toilet, elevate the head to a near eye-level position.

The use of translucent plastic toilet booster chair demonstrates Rathje’s sneaky sense of humor, along with his ability to transform an object while still maintaining some links to its previous incarnation. Not only do the head and plastic ring reference classic depictions of enlightenment – the slight grin of Buddha is mirrored with the ceramic head, and the “halo” was traditionally used to glorify an ideal person or thing. It is also, quite literally, “illuminated.” In a low-key way, it also pays homage to the idea-generating/problem-solving benefits that often come with some enlightening “throne time.”

Rathje’s work *Moth* is an old screen door with a band of colorful license-plate text crowning the top, an unsettling mass of dead moths suspended in resin in the central screen portion, and another row of text at the bottom. The two lines read “I felt like a moth” and “at the screendoor.” The top line is positioned in front of the screen, while the bottom row is actually physically trapped behind the screen along with the moths.

Dividing the text into two strips allows both “I felt like a moth” and “at the screendoor” the physical and conceptual freedom to be their own statement that does not have to be connected to the other fragment. Their separation allows them to be two individual groupings of words that just happen to be in the same piece. If they were presented as one long sentence, it would narrow the viewer’s interpretive possibilities. Limited interpretations and sharply concise language are necessary for technical manuals but can turn artwork into a didactic straitjacket.

While his pieces that utilize letters and numbers to form words invite comparisons to the scrolling text statements found in the work of contemporary artist Jenny Holzer, Rathje’s method of breaking the text into sub-statements is actually more reminiscent of the photographic images of Barbara Krueger, whose grouping method of presenting the text allows for multiple interpretations. Holzer’s work tends to fall into the straitjacket category, while Krueger’s is more enticing and nuanced in its ambiguity.

Rathje’s work simultaneously has roots in some extremely low-tech methods, such as utilizing naturally weathered and rusted found objects and materials, and some more high-tech procedures, such as honing a small repertoire of rapid-chemical-rusting techniques to mimic natural processes and using computers to compose images and to laser-cut some of his metal works.

Rathje’s visual curiosity has periodically led him to create images on fabric. Some of his newest works in the show are dye-sublimation prints (which is a process that Rathje outsourced to a company that applies his image to a heated synthetic fabric that traps the ink as it cools and contracts).

This kind of outsourcing tends to ruffle the feathers of art purists. Yet the notion that the artist makes an entire work from scratch, and that every mark is an intentional expression of the

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artist, is misguided at best. Few painters actually mill the wood to make their stretcher bars, or weave their own canvas, or grind and bind their own pigments. It is not uncommon for sculptors to contract out the actual fabrication of their ideas. The overwhelming majority of artists “outsource” some portion of their image-making; they just don’t think of it in those terms.

The dye-sublimation prints *Nightvision* and *Sleeping* were shot with infrared film and showcase the landscape at night, an aspect that is usually denied to us because of the dark. While continuing with Rathje’s notion of re-presentation of reality, these works lack the magic of Rathje’s other reconstructions. Both prints have some digital modifications, but they read as documentations of the environment. More successful works such as

Photoscenic

are physical manifestations of Rathje’s interpretations of a place, idea, or memory.

Yet even Rathje’s least successful experiments also contain successful images. The shocking and disconcerting *Earthbirth* is also a dye-sublimation print. But unlike with *Nightvision* and *Sleeping*

, Rathje has constructed an image that is hard to shake. The artist visually captured a baby’s head the moment it left the birth canal and digitally combined it with a lush green and grassy backdrop to create an image of a child being born from the earth. The warm tones of the glop-covered baby contrasted by the coolness of the green grass magnify the urgency created by seeing a child emerge from the ground.

Although the fabrication process for *Earthbirth* was technologically advanced, it is really not much different from the low-tech license-plate pieces. For each work, Rathje combines familiar elements to make an unexpected new reality while “allowing” the influences of other entities (such as the company that physically created the print) or natural forces (such as rust) to lend shape to the final product as well. Ultimately the work still flows from the wellspring of Rathje’s art – playful inquisitiveness and recombination.