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Internally illuminated torso sculptures made of paper, rough-shaped hide-like weavings with primitive figures, shimmering digital photographic constructions of a transmogrified rock-and-roll icon, and a leg crowned with a house covered in plastic toy babies represent just a sliver of the powerful artistic diversity to be discovered at this year's Venus Envy art exhibit, which populates the first three floors at Bucktown Center for the Arts (in downtown Davenport) through May 26.

Venus Envy is a multi-city event that celebrates the accomplishments of women in the arts by showcasing visual arts, fashion, dance, and music. The Mississippi serves as a symbolic conduit for what the Venus Envy catalog refers to as "female-produced arts events," which were held in Baton Rouge, Memphis, St. Louis, and the Quad Cities. The Quad Cities exhibit has work from more than 50 area artists. The artwork runs the gamut of media from very tradition-conscious weaving-based works, jewelry, and oil-on-canvas paintings to colored fingers in illuminated square bins and painted latex body casts. There will be a closing reception this Friday to coincide with Bucktown's traditional Final Fridays open-house celebration from 6 to 9 p.m. All too often weaving gets dismissed as merely "craft," and a "women's craft" at that. During the relatively elitist Abstract Expressionism period of the mid-20th Century, painting somehow became a "manly high art" and, conversely and almost by default, all other media became lesser. Venus Envy showcases several objects and images that are rooted in the weaving process that simultaneously embrace tradition and yet challenge the stereotypes of form, purpose, and the notion of craft versus art. *Judith's Hook* is one of three woven image-objects by Monique McDonald. This weaving has an amorphous natural shape that breaks away from the tyranny of the rectangle and is reminiscent of an image on stretched animal hide. The bumpy surface is bustling with painterly passages of creams, pumpkins, orange-ish ochres, and faded blues that all loosely seem to radiate from the beaded images in the center. The images are of a humanoid form sweeping upward to the left and a cascading animal-like shape flowing off the leg toward the right.

Judith's Hook is rooted in the craft-like traditions of weaving, but the handling of the colors and the looseness of the beaded forms challenge that lesser and derogatory categorization. McDonald's keen awareness of both color and texture interactions, and her directing of compositional forces, give her images painting credibility, which helps to erode the constrictive distinction between "high art" and "craft."

Corrine Smith takes the challenge even further by utilizing several woven elements to create the painted collage *Plates #7*. There are several forms within the composition that have a woven texture – both a pale-green and dark-gray patch and a pale brown passage with darker strokes. Smith balances the loose dialogue between the stabilizing larger masses and the energetic burst created by the smaller shapes and colors. The work showcases her rich color palette and a wide variety of textures and visual interactions of forms while visually "riffing" with woven passages in an unassuming and matter-of-fact way. In *Plates #7*

, the weaving is integral to the painting.

The three paintings by Jamie Elizabeth Hudrlik are exuberant explosions of color and symbols that will leave few viewers in the “undecided” category. One of them, *Photobooth*, gives us a peek at an internal and frenzied world populated with a jump-roper who is wearing a pale-green dress and wrapped with a loosely coiled zebra-striped snake like form; a girl with hand-shaped blue-spotted wings and a purple-striped shirt; and a young woman in a purple leotard who holds aloft a cadmium heart.

The conversation between the three large female figures is set-up to be the main action, but it nearly takes a backseat to the visual cacophony of drips, dots, symbols, patterns, patches of primal color, and sporadic words such as “hot” and “photobooth.”

The obvious sincerity of purpose in all of the mark-making imbues the image with a credibility that makes the muddled, over-rendered faces and the contorted hands an extension of that sincerity instead of a visual liability. Hudrlik’s personal language has a similar visual and conceptual impact as countless rows of hieroglyphics. They definitely are rich in meaning, but without some sort of Rosetta Stone, they remain untranslated. Still, they are a stunning visual experience.

By comparison, Bekah Ash’s *Two Girls #5* demonstrates a much more sophisticated and purposeful approach in her usage of color and much more distilled visual dialogue. The image is dominated by two faces rich with colorful brush strokes tethered to the tops of their torsos by their long necks. The subdued coolness found in their clothes helps emphasize the warm tones in their slightly oversized faces, thereby focusing our attention on the casual and silent comfort they share.

If *Two Girls #5* showcases a quiet and somewhat loving bond, then Billie Davids’ oil-on-canvas *You’ve Got To Be Kidding Me*
gives us a glimpse at a semi-loquacious pairing rooted in equal parts of discomfort and obliviousness.

This piece also features a dynamic between two women. The initiator of the action is a woman in black sitting at a table with her eyes closed blabbing away as if in a slow-motion marathon filibuster. She is anchored in place by the top of someone’s head that pokes above the bottom edge of the canvas and a woman in red who is staring at her over the top of her glasses with a low simmer in her eyes. The synthetic lime-green background smartly adds a low level of visual discomfort to the whole piece while accentuating the meat and potatoes of the entire work: the woman in red and her stare. Anyone who has ever served on a committee with a clueless bombast will recognize instantly the look of STFU.

There are numerous facets to be explored within the works at Venus Envy; traditional “gender” materials and relationships are just two of them. Because the premise of Venus Envy is that it is an event driven by women in support of women in the arts, the fact that work is therefore “women’s art” can’t be escaped. That being said, one of the most accurate and appropriate comments that can be made about the show is that it is bustling with engaging work. It’s not

“good for a woman”; it is just outright good work worthy of viewing and contemplation.

Although the Venus Envy exhibit ends on May 26, a roundtable discussion (led by Steve Banks and featuring Jodean Rousey Murdock, Nicole Miller, and Rachael Mullins) about the show can be downloaded by clicking here . For more information on this project, click here .