Written by Johanna Welzenbach-Hilliard
Tuesday, 15 March 2005 18:00

When I walked into MidCoast Gallery West in Rock Island to see the current exhibit featuring works by B. Thomas Lytle and Steve Banks, my senses were bombarded. I was overwhelmed by the number and disparateness of pieces on display, and didn't really know where to begin.

Banks' smaller pictures were arranged choc-a-bloc on two walls, and his larger canvases completely filled the other two. On the floor throughout the gallery were Lytle's freestanding faceless, androgenous, human figures made of steel. Here and there on the walls, his elegant masks were crowded in between Banks' colorful, mixed-media paintings.

Although both artists create modern art, their styles are completely different. Lytle's art is highly sophisticated and takes time and great skill to render. Banks' work is enjoyably original and fun, but it's not on the same level as Lytle's, and this is painfully obvious when their art is displayed together. Given the caliber of his work, I think Lytle should have been given his own show.

Known for his sculpture *The Gossips* in downtown Davenport on Second Street, Lytle displays the original moquette in this show. This sculpture shows two women with skinny stick legs sitting together and exchanging confidences.

Lytle creates his figures using "cor ten" steel, which has a rough surface texture. Despite working with such a hard material, his art is graceful and has great fluidity. His large figures have disproportionately broad torsos, small heads, and elongated limbs, as seen in such pieces as *First Flight* and *The Supplicant*.

In *First Flight*, a large figure (most likely a parent), lying down, holds a smaller figure (probably a child) up in the air on its long, thin arms. With their backs arching, legs kicking upward, and tiny heads thrown back, the two appear lost in a joyful moment, like one would see between a mother and baby at play. *The Supplicant* is a tall and slender, somber-looking figure standing with its head bowed down, shoulders hunched forward, and its knees slightly bent in a surrendering posture as the name implies. His piece *That Girl Down the Street* is a much smaller, delightful figure of a little girl gleefully skipping rope.

In a tabletop piece, *Trumpeting Angel*, Lytle uses a technique called welded steel crosshatch that resembles woven grass, like basket-weaving cast in metal. A tall, thin angel blows on an equally long, thin trumpet. The piece is strong, yet delicate – ethereal like its subject.

His mask series differs from his other works in that faces are featured. All the masks are made of ceramic and copper, although I couldn't distinguish one material from the other because he used a dark finish. Some of the masks are full faces, some are partial, and almost all are adorned with metal spikes or rods sticking up or out of them or, in one case, clustered on the face. They are arrestingly expressive and moving.

Spirit of the Amazon is composed of a rusted steel mask decorated with copper wings for a headdress and for facial embellishments (on the chin and cheeks). The mouth is agape in a tribal cry and, here, Lytle has inserted long, spiked teeth, like those of a cat. It is both fierce and

fearsome. The mask is affixed to a steel fish skeleton.

The skeletal theme runs through several other pieces as well. For *Evolution*, *First Light*, and *D eath the Creator*
, spines and vertebrae appear to make up a major part of these sculptures, which look as if they were uncovered by a paleontologist. These pieces aside, Lytle shows a mastery of the medium as he ingeniously captures the different moods and emotions of mankind through his manipulation of steel.

Nuts and bolts, wood and steel, egg cartons, Coke bottles, and paint-can lids are just some of the materials found in Steve Banks' art. It looks as if he has rummaged through dumpsters and recycling bins to create loud, sometimes obnoxious, works of art.

While incorporating trash into his work, he also mixes bright, garish colors such as neon pink, nuclear-waste yellow, and chartreuse with subdued colors such as lilac and gray, or more vomitous hues such as puce, bile, and Pepto-Bismol. The overall effect of this combination of colors and "refuse" materials is one of playfulness and childish humor.

In his eye-catching *Dialog (Ode to Felix)*, Banks has created a path of loose, colored mosaic blocks painted yellow, red, blue, green, and coral against a pastel mauve background flanked by deep charcoal. The blocks stand out sharply as they cascade down the center of the picture.

In *Constellation*, a large canvas, Banks has constructed a stucco building with a brown roof on its bottom half. Above the building is a deep blue strip of sky and a gray expanse above with a large arrow pointing from a painted letter "Z" up to the picture's edge. I liked this piece for its detail and Southwestern flavor.

Dialog: Long Stitch looks like a giant boot – the old-fashioned lace-up kind. Nails, painted brown for a rusted effect, are the eyes and painted cord is the lace. The boot part is beige against a red/brown background that is crowned with light green plaster. The piece has a comical aspect, but the subject seemed to have no connection to its title.

In his series *Small Ponderances*, Banks uses heart-shaped candy boxes as the focal point for each piece. One picture has a bright red heart set against a background of egg cartons, and another has a candy box entirely filled with aluminum canister lids and mounted on a pink background. Compared to his other works in this show, these pieces are simplistic and dull.

I did, however, enjoy his picture *Mr. Wonderful in Cha Cha Mode*, which is light-hearted and jubilant. Mr. Wonderful, with his over-sized head and goofy smile, has two other mask-like faces sticking out from either side of his head. His small body wears a black suit and tie while he joyfully dances against a city skyline at night.