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## Juxtapositions: Side by Side @ MOCA

**Douglas Max Utter**

The ten Northeast Ohio-area artists in “Side by Side” may be geographically local, but are all over the map in every other sense. Selected by MOCA Associate Curator Ana Vejzovic Sharp, the work juxtaposes tensions between representation and reality, old and new media, and symbol and substance in the contemporary world. The challenge, and the reward, are finding shared sensibilities across a very broad spectrum of materials, ideas, and interests.

Ranging from the very small and deeply satisfying abstract paintings of Eric Neff, to Michelle Droll’s large, robustly baroque painting/sculpture titled *Site Bite*—constructed of chunks of plastic, dried paint, Styrofoam and other leftovers—the show careens wildly from manner to manner. There’s the chunky, oversized Flintstone-like bench “hewn” from white plastic by Mark Moskovitz, and the serial wall sculptures by Susan Umbenhour, highly reminiscent of Donald Judd, which, however, unlike the 1960s Minimalist sculptor’s hands-off considerations of form, turn out to be deeply humanist meditations on point of view and physical accommodation. Then there are Neil McDonald’s oil paintings, which in their imitation of digital breakdown seem like a quivering, hallucinogenic update of the late-19<sup>th</sup> century Cloisonnism (a style using flat areas of color with bold dark outlines) of Emile Bernard and other Synthetists. Moving in different directions entirely, Gianna Commito renders striped intersecting planes, twirling in an artificial, mixed media dimension where a decorative incarnation of light travels at the speed of... paint.

One overarching theme in “Side by Side” might be: what you see isn’t exactly what you get. In keeping with such an uncertainty principle, photographer Barry Underwood presents richly colored Chromogenic prints that reinvent landscapes and the genre of “figures in a landscape” as luminous reveries. His 2006 works *Little Blue Tree* and *Smoke*, for instance, focus respectively on a glowing blue sapling and a mysterious, ground-hugging, patch of vapor—half campfire, half aura—against twilight forest backdrops. It’s hard to figure out what exactly is going on in these pictures, but they seem charged with energies generated by some friction between the primordial, natural world and trickster-like digressions into a modern dreamtime.

Also dream-like are Thomas Frontini’s inscrutable fantasies, set in a gentle, candy-colored realm which just might be our own world, ages after some environmental catastrophe. Resembling Roman frescos, Frontini’s beautifully executed oils also reference folk art, tempered with fey currents of magic realism. The visual logic of these works is unhooked from any rational narrative and their infectious charm stems mainly from the sense of wonder they convey, as if we were the seeing the world (whatever world that may be) through the wide eyes of the small blond children Frontini often casts as pictorial protagonists.

Also situated somewhere between myth and reality is Rian Brown-Orso’s black and white video *Rugbylove x 4*. Surrounding viewers in a self-contained room at MOCA, the four-channel work shows members of a women’s rugby team at Oberlin College running full tilt across a field. As the action progresses, bodies collide and begin piling up in a thickening mass. As a mix of brutality and eroticism, nothing beats rugby. The film examines that circumstance, and does some thinking about changing gender concepts and roles while also remembering Brown-Orso’s interest in goddess-warriors of ancient mythology.

[http://www.anglemagazine.org/articles/Juxtapositions\\_Side\\_by\\_Side\\_\\_2438.asp](http://www.anglemagazine.org/articles/Juxtapositions_Side_by_Side__2438.asp)

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Laurie Addis' series of elegant, subtly luxuriant small tapestries are the quietest voices on view at "Side by Side," but they also articulate the show's underlying themes and aspirations. Working on a software-driven Jacquard loom, Addis begins with photos of other textiles or motifs, sometimes found in museums. She then runs this found imagery through several computer programs. As older patterns are read and re-read in new contexts, anomalies and glitches begin to appear, hinting of revolutionary visions.

Ultimately that's what all the artists at "Side by Side" are up to, in a show distinguished by its fascination with half-seen portents and prospects of worlds yet to come.

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