

Steven Litt; Plain Dealer Art Critic Jan 30, 2007, The Plain Dealer - Cleveland, Ohio

Daring pairings Rising artists' best in MOCA show

Cleveland's art scene has been dominated for more than a decade by artists whose work has attained canonical status locally. Among them are Laurence Channing, Christopher Pekoc, Hildur Jonsson, Lillian Tyrrell, Masumi Hayashi and Don Harvey.

But what about the rising generation? Who's ready to step up in local esteem?

The Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland has ventured an answer in "Side By Side," an exquisitely organized overview of some of the best and brightest newer talents in Northeast Ohio.

On view are witty and intelligent abstractions by Erik Neff and Gianna Commito, some stunning photographs by Barry Underwood, a compelling video installation by Rian Brown-Orso and some enthralling textiles by Laurie Addis.

Their names, along with those of other show participants, may not be that familiar. In MOCA's opinion, they will be within a few years.

Filled with strong work, the show reaffirms two truisms about the local scene. One is that local artists are capable of producing at a very high level. The other is that it still takes enormous effort to seek out the best and to present it in a way that makes the art sing.

Too often, group shows exhibited in the region are organized in a flimsy manner, with only the haziest of themes tying together a melange of work that ranges from decent to mediocre frequently weighted toward the latter. Too often, quality takes a back seat to the democratic impulse to be inclusive.

Ana Vejzovic Sharp, the former associate curator at MOCA who organized "Side By Side" and who left Cleveland last week to work at a commercial gallery in Los Angeles, applied copious shoe leather in the task of selecting the strongest work she could find for the MOCA show. In doing so, she has set a standard other local galleries, nonprofit or for-profit, ought to follow.

The other delightful thing about "Side By Side" is that it's not merely a roundup. It's packed with ideas. Among them is Sharp's insight that there's nothing truly local about any of the artists in her show. Instead, there are local manifestations of global tendencies in contemporary art.

Sharp has identified five such concepts or tendencies, to be precise. Consequently, she laid out the show as a series of five pairs of artists, whose works are displayed "side by side."

Neff, who lives and works in Newbury Township, is represented by a series of small, luminous abstractions filled with creamy pigment and organic shapes that seem to have appeared out of some mysterious inner necessity. Their surfaces are exquisite.

Commito, who is paired with Neff, is represented by abstractions that function as witty and learned commentaries on the history of abstract painting. She combines stripes,

geometric shapes and softly brushed passages in ways that produce a vast range of delectable pictorial effects.

Addis is represented by densely woven and richly chromatic tapestries in which traditional patterns are interrupted by seemingly random intrusions of contrasting colors and shapes. Her works are paired with the paintings of Kent artist Neil MacDonald, who depicts manmade disasters in a way that recalls blurred pixels on a computer screen.

His paintings evoke the ruined landscape of the Salton Sea in California, described on an official state Web site as "an agricultural sump" that "consists primarily of commercial agricultural drainage."

Brown-Orso, an assistant professor of new media at Oberlin College, is represented by a video installation filled with projected images of some of her female students playing for the college's unofficial women's rugby team.

Sharp presented Brown-Orso's video as an example of "breaking barriers" alongside wall-mounted sculptures by fellow Oberlin faculty member Susan Umbenhour. Umbenhour's sculptures, which resemble architectural models of concert halls, intrude on the gallery space in ways that require a viewer to crane a neck or bend at the knees to explore them.

Some also are displayed at waist level, where someone in a wheelchair would have equal access to them. Instead of breaking barriers, Umbenhour is trying to remove them.

Underwood is paired with sculptor Michelle Droll in the category of "The Fantastical and the Extraordinary." Underwood's marvelously strange photographs focus on the light patterns created by fireflies in a forest at night or the surreality of a phalanx of competitive swimmers marching like lemmings into a lake for a race. His work, shown in last year's faculty show at the Cleveland Institute of Art, is captivating.

Droll, who also teaches at the art institute, is the opposite of a minimalist. She's represented in the show by "Site Bite," a giant, yawning orifice made of paint, bits of plastic foam and other materials that simultaneously evoke slime, cake icing, rotting teeth, seaweed and rocks on the bottom of the sea.

The category titled "Contemporary and Consumer Culture" combines the arid-looking surrealist landscapes of Cleveland Heights artist Thomas Frontini with a bench made by Cleveland artist Mark Moskovitz. Frontini's paintings, however, seem concerned less with consumerism than with the artist's desire to create an eccentric atmosphere of strangeness.

Moskovitz's bench, made of a contemporary white plastic, is elaborately constructed in the manner of heavy wood framing, with lap joints, dovetails and mortise and tenon joints. It's as if an 18th-century carpenter suddenly got his hands on space-age materials, producing a bizarre time warp.

Just about all the artists in the show who range in age from the early 30s to the mid-50s teach at local colleges and universities, often in adjunct or visiting positions. It's a time-honored way for artists to make a living. But it can be frustrating as well, because teaching saps energy and takes away from time in the studio.

It's to the show's credit, however, that there's not a shred of weariness in it. Sharp has done an excellent job of zooming in on the artists' best efforts. MOCA, in other words, is standing up for standards. That's what anyone in the arts ought to do.
