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# All about Life, all about art

## Charlotte Street winners reflect on personal experiences and grand ideas

By ALICE THORSON  
The Kansas City Star



A small painting of an exuberant red sofa, cushions bouncing in the air, lights up the 2008 Charlotte Street Foundation Fellows exhibition at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art.

The piece is one of a series of new “sofa-size” paintings by Adolfo Martinez, inspired by a television ad for cheap “artworks” by starving artists. The ad appealed to Martinez’s dry sense of humor, honed over decades of observing the foibles and ironies within Hispanic and the broader American culture.

“A lot of my artwork has to do with my childhood growing up in America,” Martinez has said. “I was born here, but I remember feeling like I was not from here.”

Martinez was one of four artists to receive a \$10,000 visual arts fellowship from the Charlotte Street Foundation this year. He is joined by Beniah Leuschke, Mike Hill and Jorge Garcia Almodovar.

The 2008 exhibit of new works by the winners marks the first time in the program’s 12-year history that the show is being presented in a museum. At the Nerman, it enjoys a handsome installation designed by the museum’s director, Bruce Hartman.

Unlike recent Charlotte Street Award shows, where one could discern an underlying connection between all the selected artists’ works, this one divides between life and art, with Martinez and Hill drawing on their personal experiences and passions, and Leuschke and Almodovar focusing more on art world ideas and traditions.

Almodovar’s continuing exploration of Minimalism reaches new heights in “Untitled (Radiant),” in which he reinvents the stripe painting, icon of Minimalism and the 1960s Color Field movement.

His dazzling update forgoes painted stripes in favor of a dozen, 8-foot-long polychromatic plastic strips, hung side by side from a curved armature. The coating on the plastic produces a mirrored surface, which gives the piece an active, ever-changing appearance — not to mention alluring reflected color.

A similar bid for viewer interaction comes into play in “Black Modules,” a staggered array of 11 wedge-shaped black blocks that spans an entire gallery wall. Moving around this work, one discovers that the sides of the blocks are colored, but that’s not enough to relieve the rather stolid, corporate-design feel of the whole. Beniah Leuschke has made great strides in his work the last couple of years. His showing here includes an eye-catching wall installation of vinyl



records, cut and joined to form a series of flattened globes known to map-makers as Mercator projections. Leuschke arranged 15 of these shapes in a pyramid conformation, which he has titled "Fifteen Attempts at a World Record."

From Beethoven to Boston, the selected LPs cut a broad swath through music history. Despite its humorous aspects, the work speaks to the power of music to communicate across cultures.

Equally ambitious is a contraption-like floor sculpture comprising a rhythmic progression of geometric forms composed from common materials and items, including wood boxes, plastic buckets, a cement block and a paper bag.

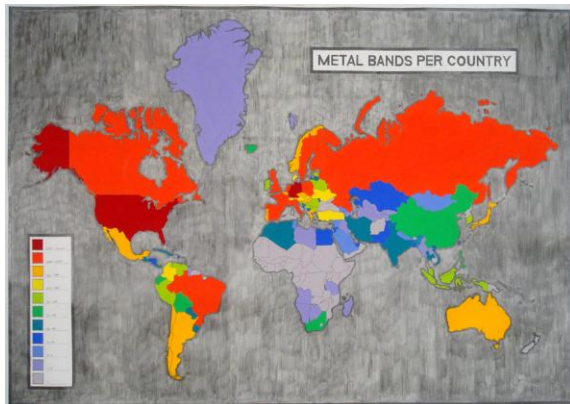


Titled "Blue Chip Artist (Hobo Trap)," this piece, with its opening scenario of a plastic hamburger underneath an art-shipping box propped open with a stick, addresses the pretensions and realities of the art world.

Leuschke has fabricated many elaborate, joke-y contraptions before, but "Blue Chip Artist" stands out for its engaging tension between crafted and rough elements.

Thanks to Mike Hill, this show tells you everything you ever wanted to know — or perhaps didn't — about heavy metal music.

Hill is obsessed with the history and trajectory of heavy metal bands, and his part of the exhibit shares his obsession through maps, timelines and a multimedia presentation. A monitor displays information about



the different subgenres — black, death, doom, glam, etc. — as viewers don headphones to hear short audio clips from Metallica, Anthrax, Carcass and other bands.

A colorful hand-drawn map details the number of metal bands in every country of the world; the timelines track albums released by various bands and which subgenres were popular when.

Looking beyond specifics, the piece is a fascinating demonstration of how information is transformed into knowledge, and the numerous subjective choices involved in compiling, organizing and presenting a vast amount of data.

The exhibit's eight works by Martinez include a small painting titled "The Idea," picturing the television ad that inspired his popular sofa-size paintings.

Laced with references to Mexican and Mexican-American politics, history and life, the sofa paintings are a lot more complex — and critical — than their everyday subject matter suggests.

In "Aztec Sofa," Martinez takes up the issue of immigration. A fringed sarape banner above a sofa upholstered in fabric printed with the Aztec calendar proclaims, "*Aqui estamos Y no nos vamos*" — "We are here and we're not going."

Martinez was chagrined to learn that he had misspelled "*gente*" when he titled another sofa painting, "Take off the sarape *si viene jente*." ("Take off the sarape if people come.")

“My mother will kill me,” he said. But it’s a good reminder that English, not Spanish, is Martinez’s first language and that many Americans of Mexican heritage don’t speak Spanish at all.

Like so many of the artist’s works, the piece is based on childhood recollections.

“When I was younger, a lot of (Hispanic) people would say they were from Europe,” he said. “You’d go to their house and there would be all these dead giveaways.”

The dead giveaway here is the painting above the sofa, which portrays the tragic lovers of Aztec legend, Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl.

A green pillow in the shape of a peyote button sets off the “Surreal Sofa” with the bouncing cushions. The red-and black upholstery features a Martinez trademark — a little dog he adapted from a book of Aztec motifs.

“They raised them to eat,” he said. “It was like a delicacy. I always thought that was kind of funny; that’s why I use it.”

With this latest round of awards, the Charlotte Street Foundation has disbursed \$392,500 to 65 Kansas City-based visual artists, chosen annually by a rotating panel of local and out-of-town arts professionals.

The money is significant, but you can’t put a price on the program’s exposure and validation — for the artists and for Kansas City.

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## **2008 CHARLOTTE STREET FOUNDATION FELLOWS**

**Where:** Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art at Johnson County Community College, 12345 College Blvd., Overland Park

**When:** 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday; 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Friday; and noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. The exhibit continues through Feb. 1.

**How much:** Free

**For more information:** 913-469-3000 or [www.jccc.edu/museum](http://www.jccc.edu/museum)