

Sunday Arts  
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## New generation artists collaborative, interdisciplinary, savvy, ready to break out

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When Kansas City's edgy young art-makers get together for a show, they're not hanging pictures on the wall.

They dress up: In fake fur and fishnet, T-shirts and jeans, more than 100 artists, actors, musicians and designers donned brightly colored wigs, animal headdresses, sculpted hairdos and oddly styled black makeup, all in the service of making a movie.

This, at least, was the scene on a recent afternoon at Kansas City's Scottish Rite Temple. The instigator was Cody Critcheloe, leader of the performance-art punk group the SSION, who had gathered the troops to shoot the final scenes of his first film.

Opening Sept. 4 at Grand Arts in Kansas City, it's a spoof on the American dream comprising a series of music videos of songs on the SSION's "Fool's Gold" CD.

Critcheloe, a 2003 Kansas City Art Institute graduate, is the star of the film. He also created the huge drawing and flashing videos of the production's set and co-wrote and sang the music on "Fool's Gold."

New York's New Museum recently coined the phrase "Younger Than Jesus" for the generation of artists, born since 1976, who are just beginning to emerge on the art world stage with a multidisciplinary, collaborative aesthetic that puts creating experiences ahead of making objects.



Critcheloe's long-time friend, actress Shannon Michalski, plays the female lead in "Fool's Gold," which will open Sept. 4 at Grand Arts.



Cody Critcheloe performs during the recent filming of his new movie, "Fools Gold," at the Scottish Rite Temple. Critcheloe is part of a new generation of artists making their mark with projects that incorporate film, video, sound, fashion, performance — and fun.

The trend is full-blown in Kansas City, where Critcheloe's film is only one of many ambitious undertakings in the works.

Several young Kansas City talents are making their marks locally, nationally and internationally with projects that incorporate film, video, sound, fashion and performance — and fun.

Next month, Jaimie Warren is taking her Whoop Dee Doo amateur variety show — in which artists mix with cloggers and gospel groups, pug clubs and school bands — to Malmo, Sweden. The group will then head to Berlin, where designer

Peggy Noland will open a branch of her Peggy Noland fashion shop for a month.

Noland and designer Ari Fish did the costumes for Critcheloe's video, garbing the dancers in outlandish polka-dotted dresses accented with bright red lips and low-crotch unitards fitted with striped tights and see-through tops.

In September, Critcheloe, Whoop Dee Doo and the KC-based Carnal Torpor collaborative of Seth Johnson, Ashley Miller and Colin Leipelt will be featured in an exhibit at the University of Chicago's Smart Museum.

Titled "Heartland," the show of socially relevant and experimental work from the Midwest began its run at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands

The Chicago incarnation, which will include Carnal Torpor's "CalmDome" installation, focuses on "making your own fun, making the world you want to live in," Johnson said. "That directly relates to Kansas City."

Art sales at area galleries may be slumping during the poor economy, but this sector of the KC art world is flourishing.

Specializing in ephemeral forms of expression, they have sought and found support outside the traditional commercial gallery system.

The Lighton International Artists Exchange Program, based in Kansas City, is funding Noland's sojourn in Berlin.

Grand Arts, the downtown nonprofit gallery, is sponsoring Critcheloe's film.

Kemper at the Crossroads has a summer show of Warren's photographs and this summer is presenting Whoop Dee Doo workshops for families.

Kansas City's Charlotte Street Foundation helped launch many of these artists, providing them with studios, grants and exhibition space. Its Urban Culture Project has presented numerous performances by Whoop Dee Doo as well as works by Critcheloe, Carnal Torpor and Julie Potratz, a 2008 graduate of the Art Institute interdisciplinary arts program.

Potratz, who as a student appeared at First Fridays wearing a giant ear costume and wielding a Q-Tip, has been a regular in Warren's Whoop Dee Doo productions. An early performance featured her soft sculpture costumes of a cupcake and a big mouth; more recently, the artist played the role of the Statue of Liberty in a skit that included her "living" Mount Rushmore.

In a 2009 show at Paragraph, Potratz danced with a marionette double of herself. And she has broken into film, asserting a notable and sultry presence in New York artist Laurel Nakadate's noir portrayal of teen longing, "Stay the Same Never Change," produced by Grand Arts in 2007.

Earlier this summer, Potratz traveled to Nashville, Tenn., and Hollywood, Fla., to appear in a new Nakadate film (scheduled to be released in 2010), in which she has a leading role.

Kate Hackman, associate director of the Charlotte Street Foundation, had several of these young artists as students when she taught at the Kansas City Art Institute a decade ago.



Julie Potratz, a 2008 graduate of the Kansas City Art Institute, is known for her performances and soft sculpture costumes as well as acting. Here, Potratz plays a disaffected teenager in New York artist Laurel Nakadate's 2007 film, "Stay the Same Never Change."

Compared to earlier generations, she said, “they’ve had a different sense of Kansas City as a more vital community, and they have a lot of confidence.”

“It’s a different mindset,” she added, “one of, ‘of course we’re going.’ They rely on the Internet and e-mail to get their work out nationally, and they’re savvy about making their work and themselves, their public personas and their artistic personas.”



Morris Martin (left), Ashley Miller, Colin Leipelt, Seth Johnson and Cody Critcheloe model Ari Fish’s “Carnal Torpor Collection” (2007). This fall, Fish will be a featured designer on the popular “Project Runway” television series.

Hackman is also struck by the way these young artists treat each other.

“When people have opportunities outside of Kansas City, they’re mindful of bringing other artists along with them and trying to be ambassadors for other artists.”

“It’s a new generation. It’s not competitive,” says designer Ari Fish, who this fall will appear on the hit television series “Project Runway” as one of the featured designers of the cable show’s sixth season.

Fish graduated in ceramics from the Art Institute in 2006 and made her fashion design debut in 2007 at the 18th Street Fashion Show, after Peregrine Honig encouraged her to participate.

Fish and her peers not only embrace what she calls an “everyday notion of artmaking” (versus artists being “pigeonholed showing in galleries”), but their productions espouse an ethic of acceptance and empowerment.

Much of this work, Fish believes, has its roots in the “coping mechanisms” these artists devised years ago, in response to the cliques and conformity of adolescence.

It goes back, she said, to “who you were and how you dealt with it, what got you through.”

One of the most striking attributes of this new generation is its members’ willingness to cross-fertilize each other’s projects. Critcheloe performs with Whoop Dee Doo; Johnson does Whoop Dee Doo’s graphics.

Warren appears in the “Fool’s Gold” film and does the photography for Noland and Fish. Fish has designed costumes for Critcheloe and Carnal Torpor, and next month she is going with Noland to Berlin.

She has designed numerous costumes for Miller, who co-wrote and produced the “Fool’s Gold” CD (see accompanying story) and also works with Whoop Dee Doo.

Performance and role-playing are central to many of these endeavors, in which the artists assume and discard identities with the ease of changing clothes.

“It’s a very experiential, in-the-moment type of creativity that involves an audience, participation, interaction,” says independent curator and writer Heather Lustfeldt.

Lustfeldt, a former assistant curator at the Art Institute’s Block Art Space, began working with many of these artists when they were students.

Their work touches on “lots of contemporary issues,” Lustfeldt said, “popular culture, fashion, trends, politics, sociology, society.”

Much of the content is embedded in the choices and strategies of making art.

Their stand against competition and for collaboration and mutual support makes for what Johnson calls a “little holistic microcosm.”

It's not a bad model for the broader society.

Fish's costumes for Critcheloe and Carnal Torpor advance an idea of “omnisexuality”— of “women being masculine enough and men being feminine enough”— that pushes past old gender roles and stereotypes.

Stacy Switzer, artistic director of Grand Arts, sees Critcheloe's video-in-progress grappling with “how to carve out a space in a patriarchal society.” It also, she says, offers a “foil to the capitalist notion of work and productivity.”

Lustfeldt stresses that despite the emphasis on ephemera, this group has not abandoned the object, producing T-shirts, fashion, photos, drawings and prints.

“They do approach it differently,” she said. “They're relying on retail, special events, online creative merchandising and boutiques. It's more relevant to what art means now to a younger generation. They're trying to give an experience, an adventure, and breaking out.”