

2009 Charlotte Street Foundation Awards show is one of best in program's history

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Topical, intelligent and good-looking, the 2009 Charlotte Street Foundation Awards exhibition is one of the best in the program's history.

The featured artists — Jaimie Warren, Dylan Mortimer and Andrzej Zielinski — are young, but they have blown past the “emerging” label. All three have actively exhibited in Kansas City and already have received exposure in New York.

Their current showing — of huge paintings, glittering lighted signs and spellbinding color photographs — augurs a bright future.

The past year was pretty good to these artists, too.

Last January, each received a grant of \$10,000 through an awards program that represents the Charlotte Street Foundation's first and best idea: putting money directly into artists' pockets, with no application process and no restrictions on how the money is spent.

Over its 12-year history, the program has paid out \$422,500 to 68 area artists.

Typically, the influx of cash — and the opportunity to consult with a professional curator while preparing for the show—inspires artists to stretch, and this exhibit, curated by Block Artspace director Raechell Smith, is no exception.

Andrzej Zielinski explores the cosmos

Zielinski's new paintings evidence a big jump in scale and a new subject: satellites, complete with colorful solar panels and a dramatic backdrop of black sky.



Andrzej Zielinski's paintings have taken a big jump in scale. He also has added satellites to his repertoire of information age icons, as seen in “Satellite Re-entry” (2009).

Since his student days — first at Johnson County Community College, then at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and finally at Yale — Zielinski has focused on icons of the information age such as laptops, cell phones, paper shredders and now the satellites.

He habitually endows them with a formidable physical presence, using thick paint, simplified forms, an insistent palette (which has varied from confectionary to darkly synthetic) and sculpted areas of modeling paste.

The new paintings give free rein to Zielinski's urge to abstraction, including a growing attraction to pattern. The most remarkable attribute of the two multipaneled canvases in the show, "Satellite Deployed" and "Satellite Re-entry," are his colorful checkerboard renditions of their solar panels.

Although satellites can serve nefarious as well as beneficent purposes, the tenor of these paintings is more lyrical than foreboding. In "Satellite Deployed," Zielinski adorns the satellite components with playful painted passages of dots, scribbles and stripes, and plants what looks like a big olive in the center of the dish.

A wad of silver- and gold-painted crumpled canvas entangles the hardware in the polyhedron-shaped "Satellite Reentry." In both works, the colorful satellites appear against an inky patch of black sky, suggesting what an astronaut might see when peering through an open hatch. From this vantage point, the manmade devices seem friendly and familiar, compared to the great cosmic unknown that lies beyond.

In a trio of three smaller works on paper, the satellites appear within ovals of black sky. Where the large paintings are compelling for their adventurous handling — at times the modeling paste looks to have been applied by an overzealous caulker — the small works are alluring for their intimacy and sense of motion; the satellites seem to float and rotate.

Dylan Mortimer fuses religion, hip-hop

Dylan Mortimer has really ratcheted things up for this exhibit, presenting a new body of work that is as stunning as it is provocative. His three signage-style wall reliefs, coated with glitter and aglow with little lights, fuse Christian messages and a hip-hop vocabulary to shocking effect.

"God Hooks My Ass Up!" he proclaims in metallic-gold gothic letters, studded with white Christmas lights and wreathed by dollar bills.

The phrase represents Mortimer's pithy, contemporary translation of the 23rd Psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

As a full-time minister at Rivercity Community Church, Mortimer is both knowledgeable about and comfortable with religion, and he is certainly not the first artist to infuse religious art with a dose of the vernacular.

Caravaggio walked this path centuries ago when he provoked scandal and controversy for bringing too much realism to his depiction of religious subjects.

Caravaggio used ordinary working people as his models, imitating Christ's elevation of the common man. Mortimer, too, grounds his religious messages in street culture and accepts its vulgarity. His "Welcome to Church, Bitches!" spelled out in lights against a blinding glitter-encrusted backdrop of ecclesiastical silver and gold, appropriates a common hip-hop term for young women. It also slyly alludes to the lesser role accorded women in many religions and churches.

For Mortimer, faith and criticality are not mutually exclusive. His third large sign, which directs the f-word at Satan, borrows the format of the hip-hop record label No Limit Records, which used the shape of a military tank.

Passionate in its rejection of evil, the piece combines Christianity's long use of militaristic metaphors — Christian soldiers, armies of Christ — with the common soldier's freewheeling use of profanity. It also reminds us of the religious dimension of so many armed conflicts, by societies that otherwise regard killing as the work of the devil.

Jaimie Warren: Theatrical, intense

In the past year, Jaimie Warren has taken her Whoop Dee Doo amateur variety show to Malmo, Sweden, and mounted a big exhibit of her photographs at Kemper at the Crossroads.

Her Charlotte Street showing offers updates of both endeavors, including an opening night Whoop Dee Doo production, a new installation/viewing room for videos of past performances and a gallery of new photographs.

The viewing room, which is lined with old props encased in plastic and illuminated by eerie blue lighting, was designed to make viewers feel they have been shut inside a refrigerator, or "Haunted Cave," according to the hand-painted sign at the entrance.

"Everything looks kind of frozen over," Warren said, "including dead bodies." But the floor, meant for lounging, is thick and soft, what Warren calls "slumber party-esque."

Warren's photographs traverse these same extremes of sensation.

Many are striking self-portraits, shot at fairly close range. They show the artist playing various roles, often in social situations involving too much food and drink.



Jaimie Warren's "Untitled (Self Portrait, Hair and Wine Glass)" (2009), is one of a series of new color photographs involving role-playing that she is exhibiting in the Charlotte Street Awards show.

The personas allow Warren to act out without worrying about propriety as she passes out after a party or stuffs her blue-and-white-painted face with a hot dog at a Royals game.

Warren seeks opportunities to pretend — putting her head in a plaster dinosaur’s mouth and crying out with mock fear — and invites others to do the same. In “Tete Is Scared,” a little boy assumes the expression of the figure in Edvard Munch’s famous painting, “The Scream,” against a backdrop of cabbage rose upholstery.

Warren’s exaggerations also speak to the social armor that everyone dons to protect the private “core” self from rejection. Sometimes it’s belligerent, sometimes calculated to please.

Wavy blond ringlets fill the frame of a self-portrait close-up, in which the slightly bleary-eyed artist peers at the viewer through a half-full glass of wine.

The image radiates vulnerability, epitomizing the millions of slightly drunk girls seeking approval and admiration who dress up and go out and put themselves at risk. If this were a movie, she’d be a missing person tomorrow.

On the plus side, theatricality lends intensity to life, a philosophy Warren even applies to food. Her “Untitled, Pink Donuts” are dressed up to the max, with coconut, food coloring and colorful nonpareils.

NEW PROJECT WALL

Kansas City’s David Ford has taken the pulse of the cultural moment and has some advice, which he has posted in a highly visible place.

The outdoor Project Wall at Block Artspace displays his new artwork featuring the image of a woman’s arms holding up a hand-lettered sign with the word “relax” against a backdrop of blue sky with fluffy clouds.

Commissioned in conjunction with the 10th anniversary of the Artspace, “Relax” is easily visible to motorists near the intersection of Main and 43rd streets as well as to area pedestrians. Ford didn’t sweat the execution. Messy drips extend from the bottom of the “r” and the middle of the “e,” in a subliminal reinforcement of his message.

The woman holding the sign is another matter — it can’t have been comfortable maintaining that arms-extended position, but had she followed the sign’s advice, the piece wouldn’t exist.

And there’s the rub. Go ahead, relax, but live with the



Block Artspace is celebrating its 10th anniversary with a new Project Wall, “Relax,” commissioned from Kansas City artist David Ford.

consequences, which is not a very relaxing prospect.

Better, perhaps, to get busy and have a hand in shaping the future, which, with any luck, will hold time to.....

ON EXHIBIT

•**The show:** "2009 Charlotte Street Visual Artist Awards Exhibition"

•**Where:** H&R Block Artspace at the Kansas City Art Institute, 16 E. 43rd St.

•**When:** Noon to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Friday and 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday. Open by appointment only: Dec. 16-Jan. 12 and March 16-20. The exhibit continues through March 27.

•**How much:** Free.

•**For more information:** 816-561-5563 or www.kcai.edu/artspace