

Art critic offers quick critiques to local artists

By LORI WAXMAN

Special to The Star

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Editor's note: In a kind of performance art all her own, Lori Waxman, a Chicago art critic and art historian, spent three days in Kansas City recently appraising the work of 30 or so artists. The parade of talent occurred at the Charlotte Street Foundation's Urban Culture Project Space. Waxman met with each artist in 30-minute appointments and wrote her review on the spot. ("The short review is at once a challenge, an insult, a record, and a piece of advertising," Waxman writes on her website, 60wradmin.org. "Its purpose is debatable and arguably quite different for the various parties involved.") Here's a sample of her pieces, offering a glimpse of the local art world as seen by an outsider. Read the rest of Waxman's instant critiques online at kansascity.com/entertainment. Waxman's "60 wrd/min art critic" project was supported by a grant from Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation.

Kendra Bulgrin

The magic of the miniature has much to do with the strange ability of very small things to represent the very large. The same can be said for the gargantuan. It is the average-sized which so often fails to convey enough. No wonder, then, that Kendra Bulgrin has chosen a miniature plastic female figurine, along with an equally small and fake coyote and cow, to tell a story about loneliness and



longing, dislocation and searching.

The story is not really so clear as all that, told as it is through a series of deftly painted oils that place these characters in landscapes of odd objects — tires, wiring, makeup compact — and picturesque vistas. The effect is deeply Surrealist and, as with most Surrealist paintings, the works' titles can have a potent impact. Not a Surrealist one, mind you — their themes of the erotic, the unconscious and the marvelous do not really belong here (well, perhaps the marvelous) — but one in keeping with the above narratives evoked by Bulgrin. “The morning light made anything seem possible” is one such phrase; “You may no longer go anywhere anymore” is another.

All that's missing is for all of the paintings to be so graced, and for the titles to find a more permanent place in the works themselves, rather than on temporary wall labels.

Mark Southerland

Jazz originated as an improvisational music, though you'd hardly know it today, as so much of the form has become staid and set, part of a historical record. Records are meant to be played and danced and sung to, however, and always, but always, broken.

Mark Southerland, jazz musician and sculptor extraordinaire, has found a route — passing by “Pee-Wee's Playhouse,” taking a left at Disney's “Fantasia,” running through the Little Prince's planet — to keep the wild but beautiful improvisational heart of jazz alive.



His gigs involve himself dressed as a monk from some far-off planet, clothed in flowing, brilliantly patterned robes; his co-performer and sometime collaborator Shay Estes wears Technicolor bodysuits that recall Lady Miss Kier by way of mermaid heaven. Both sport water polo caps, of course, for that playful

underwater feel. The stage is a combination kid's room and psychedelic star lounge. And the instruments, oh, the instruments.

Southerland plays loose and fast not just with music but with the brass tubes that make

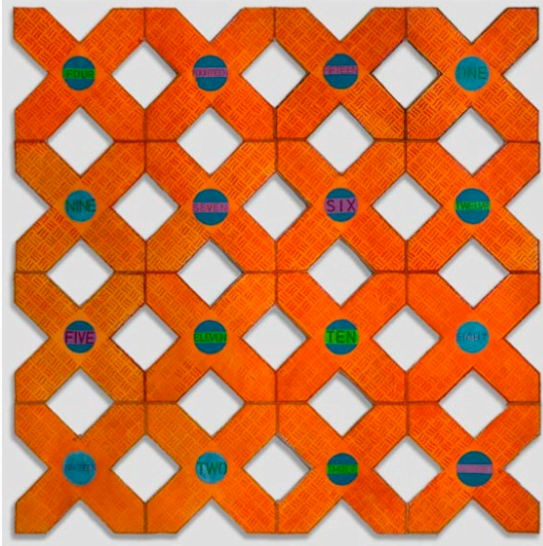
it, combining and separating and recombining their parts into sculptures that Estes wears over her shoulder or through her legs, and he toots. Sometimes the effect is a bit too Surrealist woman-as-muse-as-object, but then Estes opens her mouth and belts out a gorgeous tune of her own, and all is right again.

Not that there's any one way for it to be right, at least in jazz. That's how improvisation goes, thank goodness.

Linda Wellner

How rational is our world? Can natural phenomena truly be accounted for through ones, twos and threes, through triangles, X's and O's? Artist Linda Wellner believes it can, and she has made a practice of creating drawings, sewn paintings and photocollages that focus on this notion. It's an idea with a long and multicultural history, involving the kind of Islamic patterning found in the Alhambra and the theories of Western philosophers like Pascal.

How Wellner tackles these lofty notions, however, is decidedly down to earth, even naïve, involving simple pattern and decoration, as well as a technique that most closely resembles the traditional women's art of quilting. All of it reveals a fascination and belief in the truth of rational systems and their ability to say what matters about the cosmos.



Whether Wellner is able to convince the viewer is another story, however, and perhaps even beside the point. The complex theories behind her work are not explicated by the work, only visually enshrined by it. The feminist twist is in having accomplished that through such accessible and modest means, rather than the marble and concrete that the great philosophers are accustomed to. The irony of it, though, is how often women's concerns were left out of such philosophies.

David Newsome



Is there such a thing as pure abstraction? The early history of the form suggests not — even an artist like Mondrian relied on the world around him to generate his compositions. And why not? What in the world wouldn't benefit from careful study by a painter's eye, especially a painter who felt the freedom to then depart from those

observations to generate something new from it that relies on color and line, brush and swirl?

Such is the way with the best of David Newsome's abstract canvases, which bask in the pleasure of striking color combinations and playful paint handling, while subtly acknowledging the world from which they at least in part derive.

Hence the picture "Puzzle Men," a witty, vibrant panel that, thanks to six carefully placed dots, taps the human desire to find anthropometric qualities everywhere. Hence the modestly sized series Newsome refers to as "Fractional Pieces," gorgeous whirls of loose paint in ravishing fusions of color. Though utterly abstract, these paintings recall nothing so much as the precious endpapers with which books were once bound, before the days of paperbacks and mass-market hardcovers.

Least exciting is a square picture titled "Kite Mosaic," whose tacky, spongy surface and muddy colors feel grounded and dull, with none of the wild wondrous windiness that kite flying promises. Perhaps Newsome is more reader than flyer? Mondrian himself only abstracted those landscapes that truly jazzed him — let's hope Newsome continues to do the same.