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Exhibit by Charlotte Street fellows features explosive images of liberation

By ALICE THORSON

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The Charlotte Street Foundation Fellows exhibition features Peggy Noland's first video, in which the artist blows up a clothes rack of her fashions.



The battle of rational versus irrational that is fueling American politics also surfaces as a key theme of the 2011 Charlotte Street Foundation Fellows exhibition at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art.

The exhibit, which highlights new work by this year's visual arts winners of the prestigious local awards, includes a large painting and related smaller works by Ricky Allman, elegant ceramic works presented in inelegant packing cases by Andy Brayman, and a video by Peggy Noland.

The video marks a first for Noland, who is best known as a designer of outlandish fashions.

And it's a deadly serious piece, for all the hilarity she provoked with a slow-motion clip of a smack on a man's bare bottom during her opening night artist's talk.

The use of slow motion is an essential component of Noland's 4-minute video, "S/S 2012," in the Charlotte Street show, which features an exploding clothes rack of her colorful patterned fashions.

Tapping fashion's equation with frivolity, the piece reverberates with the old adage, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity" in an uncertain world.

It opens with close-ups of wildflowers in a field, where the clothes rack makes its first appearance. Intentionally or not, the footage offers an uncanny evocation of the biblical advice to “consider the lilies of the field” when it comes to clothing.

Noland positions the rack in various natural settings, including a pond and an abandoned quarry, before she destroys it with a violence suggesting a nuclear explosion. Her slowed footage captures the clothing’s tattered fragments, swirling through the air; at one point a billowing fireball, beautiful and terrifying, fills the screen.

Noland describes the work as an homage to Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni, perhaps best known for his film “Blowup,” about a fashion photographer and a murder.

“(My) film encourages building only to destroy,” Noland says, “and is the most masculine work that I’ve ever done, including some ‘Terminator 2’ style explosions.”

Amid the destruction, there’s a reminder here, that life and art go on, despite terrorism, global warming and the uncertainty of fate. And given fashion’s inextricable ties to the culture of consumerism and planned obsolescence, Noland seems to derive a sense of liberation from blowing up the products of her creativity.

Also explosive

Images of explosions also function as symbols of liberation in the paintings of Ricky Allman. His \$10,000 Charlotte Street grant enabled him to create his largest painting to date.

The 8-by-13 “Annunciate/Repudiate” (2011), is part of an ongoing series about Allman’s decision to leave the Mormon Church and embrace ideas and concepts forbidden by his Mormon upbringing.

“I’m now excited about science and possibilities for the future,” he says in the essay for the exhibit written by critic and Star contributor Elisabeth Kirsch.

Kirsch relates that Allman’s “first paintings were dark and apocalyptic, because he trusted in the End of Days prophecies and was convinced the world was going to end.”

“Annunciate/Repudiate” portrays a dizzying white metropolis of fragmented structures, many of which evoke Mormon Churches with their spires removed.

An explosion of colorful fragments occupies front and center, but despite this emblem of liberation, the new world Allman envisions is still beset by the forces of irrationality, symbolized by chaotic little vignettes of swirling paint.

There’s a close-up of one that resembles a tornado among Allman’s two series of small paintings in the show.

“Mediate” comprises 12 6-by-6-inch paintings; “Segment” features 27 8-by-8-inch paintings. The two groups are interspersed on the gallery walls. For these, Allman painted his signature motifs on gridded sections of a large canvas, which he physically cut apart and displayed as individual works. Offering a different take on the notion of fragmentation, there’s a kernel of an idea here, but these first realizations fail to fire the imagination.

More satisfying is the 2011 canvas, “Free,” a vista of fractured architecture amid the mountains of Allman’s native Utah. The Nerman purchased it last summer from the artist’s show in Paris.

First major local show

The Charlotte Street exhibit marks the first major local showing for ceramic artist Andy Brayman, who has an extensive resume of exhibits around the country.

As in Noland’s video and Allman’s paintings, an awareness of global warming haunts the interplay of nature and culture in Brayman’s ceramic vases and bowls, which he has filled with fresh flowers to underline their functionality.

But their back story is more complicated.

“The objects in this exhibition come from my research involving 3-D computer-aided fabrication coupled with sensor data from the natural world,” Brayman says.

He conducts his research and fabricates his objects at the Matter Factory, a studio, laboratory and projects space he established in Kansas City, Kan., in 2005.

Brayman often combines organic and geometric vocabularies in single work, as in “Spiral Vase with Drops,” a tall, geometrically faceted vessel patterned with droplets of blue that fade as they move from top to base.

Many of his vessels have faceted exteriors, realized in varying degrees of sharpness and softness as seen in a pairing of a “Celadon Hexagon Spiral Vase” and “Celadon Oval Spiral Vase.”

Both vases grew out of a computer drawing of a spiral, Brayman said, and the tightness of the spiral was determined by a sensor that recorded the amount of UV light outside.

There was more light in the data used for the “Hexagon” vase, which is why it is more faceted, Brayman said. The differences between the two vases were also determined by “a few decisions early on,” he said. His choice of a hexagonal opening at the top of one and an oval opening for the other determined each vessel’s resulting shape.

For other vases in the show, Brayman used U.S. Geological Survey data tracking the depth of the Missouri River.

“When making the mold (on a given day), I let the depth of river determine the height. If it’s 20 feet deep, the vase would be 20 inches,” he said.

In Brayman's "Double Stem Vases," the same form takes on a different personality depending on the surface adornment. The different patterns are based on drawings he creates on the computer.

Brayman stresses that his works are not records of the natural world. In fact, there's a lot of creative decision-making involved in what data he uses and how he translates it visually. But in all of his works, technology mediates the experience of nature.

His decision to present his ceramic objects in packing crates and atop crude, sawhorse-supported tables adds a whole new topic of conversation to his display.

Brayman compares his tableaux-style groupings to still lifes. For viewers, the departure from conventional pedestals also serves as a pointer to the work's conceptual dimensions.

Nerman Museum director Bruce Hartman discerns an architectural link in the form of "weird shelter structures" within the three artists' bodies of work in this year's Charlotte Street show.

Although the fellowship recipients are chosen solely on the basis of artistic merit — with no attempt to elicit a shared curatorial theme — as often happens with this annual exhibit, it taps salient aspects of the Zeitgeist.

To reach Alice Thorson, call 816-234-4783 or send email to athorson@kcstar.com.

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