

IT REALLY DOES MAKE PERFECT

BY MEISHA ROSENBERG

PRACTICE: VISUAL ARTS FACULTY EXHIBITION

OPALKA GALLERY, SAGE COLLEGE OF ALBANY, THROUGH FEB. 21

SINCE 2002, WHEN THE OPALKA Gallery first opened and held an all-faculty show, the arts faculty of the Sage Colleges has grown. So what defines this group of 16 artists? What you'll find is a sincere engagement with the process of art; a theme of sustainability in design; and some grappling with identity and media politics.

A willingness to ask political questions (some would say politically correct) emerges in two participatory artworks. *GlobeAll*, by Sally Packard, department chair, sets up two computers to give an online carbon-footprint quiz. I pondered my guilt as I removed and inflated the toy globes, hung on a globe outline on the wall, corresponding to my four earths' worth of

destruction. Less guilt-inducing but just as interactive is Sean Hovendick's *Be a Man*, which invites visitors to activate clips from sitcoms of the 1970s and '80s. Each clip captures a stereotyped gender role (i.e., Edith from *All in the Family* is the nag, repeating "Dinner's ready!" while the Incredible Hulk roars as the warrior). The whole thing is convincingly done, if somewhat Gender Studies 101. (Hint: Touch the same image to get it to stop.)

Working nicely next to this display, Harold Lohner's *Heads Up* is an almost-16-foot-tall assemblage of blue mono-prints of men's heads in different poses, the color fading towards the top. Lohner's men seem to sing or shout, toss and turn in a way that points up tensions between male toughness and vulnerability.

The theme of identity soon gives way to one of design, architecture, and illustration. Lynn Capirsello's Photoshop prints speak of design theory while Gina Porcellis, also a designer, makes monotypes of plant life. Kent Mikalsen, an

entertainment designer and architectural consultant, has paintings depicting feet in spiritual ascension rising over bodies of water. Matthew McElligott's illustrations hang near a table with some of his books for children.

Design might be able to sell an arts education to prospective students, but can it save the planet? Many here would have us think so. Janus Welton's model for the Ram Dass Library at the Omega Institute is on display with its environmentally sustainable mandala floor-plan (according to her artist's statement, "the mandala crystallizes the rhythm of creation.") Designer Jean Dahlgren's poster *Urban Forest Project* originally hung in Times Square.

Others portray darker visions of the earth. Melanie Hope juxtaposes painted Northeastern landscapes with collaged newspaper headlines about the PCB cleanup in the Hudson. In a more elemental fashion, Timothy M. Martin's fractured, hollowed stoneware sculptures are also preoccupied with the environment, investigating geological

themes inspired by a residency in Ballinskelligs, Ireland.

In general the sculptures did not fit well in the gallery; the 9-foot-tall wood *Goddess of Broken Dreams and Lost Hearts* by Mikalson would be more at home in a beloved camp lodge, while Martin's work needed some stark black and white photographs or earthworks behind it.

Although the remaining artists had divergent styles, it was nice to get away from the design and environment theme. Holding out a lone spot as a representational painter, Gary Shankman's oils of toys and dolls are precisely realized studies of color and form. Also referencing traditional painting, Linda Morrell's photographs of personal bulletin boards become found still lifes.

Kelly Jones's fascinating animation installation, *Olive in Gloves*, projects an eerily arresting scene that will be familiar to anyone who has seen the psychosexual cartoon abstractions of Sue Williams or Arturo Herrera: Olive Oyl's ghostly, headless body, wearing gloves, spiderlike, climbs a ladder halfway up, and then fades away.

Another compelling, surreal work is Beau Comeaux's *A Frame*, a digital photographed fabrication of a white, triangular building at night with elements of infrastructure—wires, windows, air conditioning units, a utility sink—on the outside.

The most visceral work, *Alma, Holy Week*, by Melody Davis, is a sheet or skin of glue permeated with urine, menstrual blood and ear wax (among other excretions). It speaks powerfully of women's roles as metaphysical "glue" in human relationships. Her two personal memory boxes open to reveal shells, alpaca wool, a bird's nest, while a Congolese healing figure stands watch.

Inevitably a little of this and a little of that, a faculty show can still yield surprising discoveries. Arts departments in higher educational settings are somewhat protected from the market forces that elsewhere define art. Even if it at times gets predictable and cerebral, art in a college setting is important: It lets visitors and students alike engage with art as an open-ended process. ■



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Kiss my grits: Sean Hovendick's *Sugar and Spice* (video installation, 2007-09).