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Going Public

RNG's 'UnderCurrents' reveals first love of Bemis Center artisans

By Michael Joe Krainak

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The RNG Gallery's latest exhibit, "UnderCurrents," is an apt title for a venue that has ventured successfully under the radar since its beginning in October 2007. Ever since artist and owner Rob Gilmer began its maiden voyage with the work of Sora Kimberlain in "Light Travelers," he has encouraged artists who largely work out of the mainstream. This unique group show not only lives up to expectations, it challenges a few as well.

"UnderCurrents" opens this Friday, April 4 from 6–10 p.m. at RNG's non-descript storefront at 1915 Leavenworth St. next to Dixie Quicks restaurant, co-owned by Gilmer and partner/chef Rene Orduna. The show features five current and former employees of the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts – Rachel Ziegler, Jeremy Stern, Matt Lowe, Natalie Linstrom and Andrew Hershey. The five collaborated on the exhibit's title, which matches well with curator Gilmer's intent and the complexity of the work itself.

Though many patrons know the five because of their Bemis credentials, they consider themselves, rightly so, as artists first, just as those associated with universities, such as Wanda Ewing (UNO) and Tim Guthrie (Creighton) do. What they bring to each institution by way of instruction, installation, curatorship and service is enabled by their own creative vision, which often gets second billing because of the demands of the former. "UnderCurrents" for Gilmer is an opportunity to reveal the artist behind the public persona.



The exhibit is as complex in theme as it is diverse in media, revealing undercurrents that vary from the personal to the spiritual and the social to the conceptual. In the former you will find assemblage from Linstrom, digital prints and a video by Stern and a large three-part graphite tableau of Lowe's, and the latter includes Hershey's painted block prints and Ziegler's mini-installation. You may be familiar with their art, but all work here is current, reflecting not only interesting growth but a few surprises as well.

Stern continues to explore "the literal and figurative terrain of the American landscape," as he explains in his artist statement, but this time he has ventured west after leaving the Bemis Center as its former curator and assistant director. His travels have been translated into a series of 16 "Cross Country" digital monoprints, each representing a state recently traveled through as well as a 20-minute video of his sojourn with the same title.

The prints resemble those from a recent show of his entitled "Beasts United," as each state, Nebraska, Arizona, Colorado, etc., is composed of a fantasy creature, part prehistoric, part video game monster,

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cleverly composed of said state's official motto, bird, mammal, fish, insect, fossil and song, among others. These digital beast collages as well as drawings are then overlaid on a vintage road map further cementing the identity.

Though his beasts have political and geographical implications indigenous to each state, Stern has also said they are mythological, "along the lines of guides or guardians." This seems more fitting as he is currently in transition, between jobs as it were. The difference is that now his map quest is moving forward as he explores westward in search of graduate work whereas before his art seemed to investigate past locations "and relatives I've never met."

"Cross Country" the video on the other hand is more reflective and poetic as Stern's lens captures a variety of landscapes mostly from the driver's seat of his car during the past three months. On the surface the imagery is quite beautiful as he often overlays double and triple exposures of the same location whether a desert, a mountain view, cityscape or verdant valley. Night scenes are especially effective as they mix static, distant city sights with streaming headlights of cars passing by. This juxtaposition of destination and journey lends a melancholy mood to a life captured in transition, no longer here, not quite there. That is the undercurrent of Stern's "Cross Country."

Linstrom, Bemis' Community Arts Program Director, is also working through change, but for her it's more personal than professional. Though she is quite busy what with Co-art Directing for NETV's "Independent Lens" series, she has found the time and need to sort out the remains of past relationships and turn them into an archival exhibit. When artists wear their hearts on their sleeves in the form of a paramour's souvenirs placed on display you might be tempted to label it "airing one's dirty linen," but this is not the case with Linstrom.

The undercurrent in this self-described purge is more than hinted at in the comic, ironic titles of her work here. Each assemblage consists of a leftover from a love nest, carefully matted and finished in an ornate gold frame. The pieces include such telling items as "Clean Up: The Process Piece," an embroidered bath mat, "Italian Casanova: Note From an Ex to My Sister," and "I Have Nothing Left to Say to You," another love note from the past. Though these oddly moving works are satirical, putting a frame on the past does indicate a closure, sending at least a tentative message that this artist too is ready to move on.

Matt Lowe, the technical services manager for Bemis, is best known as a sculptor whose latest piece is a large outdoor sculpture, "The Color of Light," which adorns the front courtyard of the Old Market condos, the Rows at SoMa. But in this exhibit Lowe has gone medieval-modern on us with a large triptych of the Nebraska plains with spiritual overtones or, in this case, undercurrents. Titled "Luke: 5-6," Lowe's iconic imagery refers to the gospel text spoken by angels at the sepulcher of the risen Christ: "He is not there, but is risen."

Lowe depicts this three-part Easter tableau symbolically in graphite with two enraptured, angelic nuns hovering over a blooming lily with their habits all aflutter. This is an emotionally charged scene with a farmhouse in the background and a storm raging overhead. Yet the artist has given the religious undercurrent a paradoxical edge by placing flowering thistles, a noxious, invasive symbol of the wilderness according to Genesis, in the foreground. What at first appears to be a portentous narrative of the Rapture or the Second Coming may also warn of the "purple passion" of both lily and thistle: "what ye sow, so shall ye reap."

Less personal and more detached are the works of Hershey and Ziegler, but they too have undercurrents of their own. Hershey, Bemis' media director, offers a set of mono and duotone block prints that were painted over in multiple layers and then sanded down. The untitled reductive landscapes are the most striking visual pieces in the exhibit, all the more because they resemble the animation of Richard Linklater's film, "A Scanner Darkly," only streaked and scratched.

Hershey describes his mixed media prints as social commentary on "increasing environmental



pressure such as global warming, thinning resources and unsustainable lifestyles.” But underpinning the wasted images of his parking lot, street scenes and hillsides that depict these themes is the inescapable simple beauty that the artist creates from such mundane, ordinary settings.

Without question, the most unusual contribution in the show comes from Rachel Ziegler, the managing director of BJC Projects. Reflecting her interest and participation in the art of sales and marketing, Ziegler presents four variations on her personal Bemis business card, presented in simple Plexiglas holders, each with a subtle but significant printing flaw such as logos tilted or oversized and images fuzzy or pixilated. She says her original conceptual intent was to comment on the following ideas: presentation, communication and legitimacy. But an additional undercurrent took place when, ironically, the commercial printer at first declined to print Ziegler’s originals because “he thought I had made too many mistakes in my design.”

One last interesting undercurrent. While previewing this exhibit, a diner wandered in from Dixie Quicks and said to this critic: “This is all really interesting, but I’m not sure I’d want it hanging in my house.” Perhaps not, but that is the risk significant contemporary artists and venues are willing to take out of the mainstream.

I see France

Hal France is now the appointed founding director of KANEKO, a novel non-profit organization in downtown Omaha. KANEKO is sure to add a unique quality to the already incomparable Old Market by acting as a bustling arts center where disciplines collide.

Imagine a world where an inspired metal worker might team up with a clay sculptor and then enlist the help of an exotic seamstress for a little flair. Under the guidance of adept hands and judicious eyes, the results could be phenomenal. Maybe the theatrical troupe down the hall would be interested in using the piece in their production. This is the sort of atmosphere anyone can expect at KANEKO under Hal France’s leadership. And work is not restricted to the typical art themes. It has been called a “collaborative space” where the practitioners of science, philosophy, the arts in general, and even business can collide to see where their innovations take them.

Beginning May 2008, Hal France will officially take the reigns for his position as founding director of KANEKO. He has many noteworthy accomplishments. His illustrious career in the arts began in 1981, with an appearance at Washington’s Kennedy Center. He broke into the European opera scene in 1992 with the Royal Opera of Stockholm. France has also spent six years as Music Director for the Orlando Philharmonic and 10 years as artistic director of Opera Omaha.

- Emerson McRaven

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