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CULTURE

Good Fellows

'State of the Art' in good hands as Bemis exhibits 14 NAC honorees

By Michael Joe Krainak

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The mission of the Nebraska Arts Council couldn't be more succinct. The non-profit organization exists to promote, cultivate and sustain the arts for all Nebraskans. In short, the NAC believes that "The Good Life" is measured by something other than national championships, "American Idol" chatter and million dollar contracts and buyouts.

Perhaps the greatest proof of NAC's commitment to this "other" is its Individual Artist Fellowship program, which rewards artists annually who have best contributed "to the quality of life in this state." IAFs are awarded on a three-year rotation in the visual, literary and performance-filmmaking arts. The NAC is currently accepting applications in the latter while in 2007 it awarded \$20,000 to 14 Nebraska visual artists in three categories: a \$5,000 Distinguished Artist Award to Jamie Burmeister, \$2,000 Merit Awards for James Bockelman and Mary Zicafoose and \$1,000 Merit Awards to Santiago Cal, Ann Gradwohl, Eliska Morsel Greenspoon, Tim Guthrie, Aaron Holz, Leslie Iwai, Susan McGilvrey, Marjorie Mikasen, Troy Muller, Robert Schweiger and Bill Shaffer.

Meanwhile, as the NAC was rewarding the visual art of the state, the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts was curating its second exhibit of IAF winners, "State of the Art." Bemis says the show's purpose is to provide the public with the opportunity to view just how "profoundly visual artists impact the quality of life in Nebraska." This opportunity will continue until Feb. 23 when this impressive and diverse display, curated by former assistant director Jeremy Stern, closes. Though all the artists expressed appreciation of their monetary award at Bemis' panel discussion in December, they agree that art enriches the audience as much as the creator. It's a priority they hope all of Nebraska will continue to invest in.

"As an artist, I cannot imagine the world without art," Greenspoon said. "But, it seems that the government constantly needs to be reminded how the quality of life goes hand-in-hand with the arts. Just look at Omaha. Business has demanded that there be an identity to Omaha besides meat, sports and Warren Buffett. I am especially concerned over the lack of arts funding in public schools, teachers overburdened with sizes of classes and 'no child left behind' dictates very little room for creativity."

Greenspoon's "In Magda's Curio Cabinet" certainly does not lack for creativity as this mixed media wall assemblage is an original homage to the "tchotskies" and memories associated with the artist's mother. Resembling an ancient Oriental screen framed in metallic shades of copper surrounding her silver images, what began as merely reverential and personal became a sacred trust and documentation of her Mother's connection to the Holocaust with a major motif of a woman holding a baby threatened by jagged and jarring red arrows.

As educators also, part-time or otherwise, many of the IAF winners also value the role of creativity in a well-rounded life however practical, imaginative or intellectual. "When I go to a show," said Susan McGilvrey, a ceramics artist and instructor, "I want to look at technical stuff

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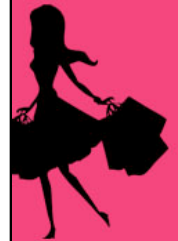
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and art-marks and get all excited to go home and do some art rather than ponder messages or expressions which normal people seem to do. As an educator, I get all wrapped up to drag students to see the good stuff that applies to whatever my students are doing."

What McGilvrey has done in this show is some remarkable ceramics both in quantity and quality. In groups or as single items, her collection includes bowls, plates, teapots, vases and mugs, all visually arresting beyond any perceived functionality or obvious craftsmanship. Think of them as 3-D vessels of the artist's singular intelligence and imagination, many of them animated with abstract and figurative representation. And yet, they would look just as "proper" at home as they do here.

Art need not be so rational for sculptor Leslie Iwai. "To see something celebrated that seems to have no practical function reminds us there is value inherent and beyond that which is purely functional. That dreams and other things unseen have value. Visual art offers clues into parts of life's story, not always accessible in words." Whether her celebrated and controversial "Sounding Stones" or her entry here, "Crash," a hugely portentous, yet elegant crushed tulip made of steel, vinyl, ostrich feathers and text from the Financial Times and Wall Street Journal, Iwai knows how to tap into the unconscious and the real, always in the same object or installation.

Kinetic artist and instructor Burmeister also appreciates how art rewards both the conceptual and the intuitive in one's life. "I get to wake up every day and go wherever my interests take me. Exploring music, technology, consciousness, meditation, the environment, voyeurism, etc. If you would have told me 10 years ago I would get a \$5,000 award for making interactive kinetic sculpture, I would have laughed and said I know nothing about sculpture, installations and electronics but wouldn't that be great. This artistic journey has led to a very interesting life." It's a journey he happily shares with the viewer in the form of an interactive installation called "Deconstruction." Burmeister invites one to enter his parlor of sensory fun and overload as one sits in various chairs and sets off a cacophony of bells and whistles. Clearly, couch potatoes welcomed.

For Guthrie, a mixed media artist and instructor, art is both functional and cerebral. This is evident with his most provocative "Homage to Hibakusha," comprised of encaustic paintings, a DVD of a nuclear explosion and morphing faces and paper cranes folded by Hiroshima Peace Museum volunteers. The content speaks eloquently for itself, but the installation is physically impressive as well. "Of course, design is in everything we see and use, from iPods and clothing to cars and houses. Although it stands on its own beyond design, visual arts is one of the elements we look at and think about. Art that encourages us to think and react is more likely to impact the quality of life than art that does not."

Like Guthrie, artist Gradwohl creates works both conceptual and personal. "My professors and mentors taught me to look within myself for the sources of work." Regarding her 15-foot tall American flag in olive drab, khaki brown and red, she says, "It seems perfectly natural to make work that explores current political issues. I am aware that others may not agree with me, but I move forward with confidence that I live in a time and place that allows artists to make issue-based work." Consequently her piece, "Prototype for Democracy" Either for us or against us," is an effective metaphor and comment on America's misuse of post 9/11 patriotism to a militaristic end in Iraq.

Schweiger also explores socio-political concerns with his aptly titled "shrine and altarpiece, or Thou Shalt Not Kill," a pair of brightly colored, almost garishly so, single-folded tablets of constructed layers of graphic warning patterns often in religious and military iconic imagery, i.e., crosses, national flags and armed service medals. Who or what comes to worship at this altar? A flock of bright shiny pennies that stretch more than 15 feet into the gallery. "A society without art is a hopeless and depleted society," Schweiger says. "As an artist I hope I can provide the viewer

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with a springboard to the thought process.”

Issues aside, several IAF winners consider their work to be simply a matter of deep personal expression and communication. “I make art because I have to,” says Shaffer. “I get mentally ill when I go for a long stretch without working on something. For the Bemis show I knew there would be clever, conceptual pieces surrounding mine, so I pushed my art the other direction, more ‘emo’ than usual. Lately, I’ve been drawn to working on the most difficult things to depict, like rain, private feelings ... and memories.” His five drawings in the Bemis show move beyond normal expectations of this medium into the realm of the surreal and the dreamscape. In particular is the absolutely sublime “Detective Stories Series #1 (Melinda),” a portrait full of beauty and character, however mysterious, an enigmatic figure seductive and secretive to the end.

Zicafoose, a textile artist, understands Shaffer’s passion for art in his life. “Absolutely, yes. I can’t separate my life from visual art — it’s the lens and filter through which I filter everything. I’d mortgage the house in a minute to buy a piece of art I knew we needed to live with.” Why? “I see pieces of art as teachers ... they open doors and close chapters and move us forward in our quest to become more human and realized and whole.” As proof, she offers three artful, beautifully crafted hanging tapestries such as “New Dream” and “Sun with Shadow” that interpret natural imagery with iconic overtones. Her choice of hues and tones are bold and brash just as her weaving technique is sophisticated and refined, a process that heightens the simplicity of her patterns and designs.

Perhaps abstract painter Mikasen speaks for all the IAF recipients regarding art’s place in society. “And what are human beings without their imaginations? I think we can conjure up a pretty grim, sterile world that has no surprises, no invention, flights of fancy,” but she cautions, “I am not removed from the world I live in. I think making art, painting in my case, is necessary. I’ve always felt a sense of responsibility to the craft and to the audience to do the best I can.” Mikasen’s colorful, abstract paintings, three virtual stereopairs and one large canvas, are among the most imaginative and complex works in the show. With titles such as “Mystery,” “Rosa 3,” and “Creative Matrix,” they are visually adventurous designs, stimulating in their pure hues, obtuse angles and curvaceous lines. They exude an energy force field that penetrates beyond their optical games and illusions.

“State of the Art” also includes interesting work from Holz, Muller, Bockelman and Cal. Holz offers several decorative oil, resin and acrylic ovals that resemble collectible fashion plates. His images of an aloof “Matthew” and a sad “Greta” are so unexpectedly and disturbingly posed they resemble specimens for study rather than sympathy. He also has a large oil on birch panel, “Infancy Conforms to Nobody,” which depicts two diaperless infants around their wading pool. With their backs to us, it’s their world of fresh-scrubbed innocence and discovery.

Muller’s large oil on canvas collages comment on social issues but in a pop art vein. The imagery includes bad food groups like a box of chocolates, burger biggies, a crushed aluminum six-pack and smoking paraphernalia. All the items are cleverly catalogued like scientific charts and bear text message warnings on their frames. But, what must be the oddest, most striking and antithetical piece comes from Cal, a mixed media, full-figured and darkly forbidding Mother Superior in her titled “Habit” of black and white protected by a red umbrella. This Nun Noir is a characteristically unique, playful and often satiric work from one of Nebraska’s most original voices.

Bockelman has a series of mixed media on paper that all begin ominously “Bomb Run Card...” Yet, despite their political implications these nine works and his larger “Honeycomb and Swarm” are more abstract and expressionistic in style. Confronted with the latter’s carved, crudely beautiful, natural imprint, one isn’t prepared for the refinement of color, tone and shading of the series, which in their diminutive seem even more thoughtful and precise than their big brother as if

created by unseen forces or some unseen hand.

Most notably, "State of the Art" is a vivid representation of Nebraska's artistic and cultural diversity, a core belief shared by the NAC and its IAF winners in what it means to have a quality of life. "Making visual art available is an inherently respectful thing for a society to do," Mikasen said. "Any society that makes that kind of experience available and celebrates it is really saying 'we trust you to draw your own conclusions.' Isn't that the kind of embrace we all want to live in?"

Obama for Omaha!

Sounds like a good slogan, except for the fact that presidential candidate Barack Obama is campaigning for the most important job in the world and that has little to do with our fair city.

But Obama does have some love for Omaha, because he will make a late afternoon appearance Thursday at the Omaha Civic Auditorium. Details of his visit are still being worked out.

Nebraska's Democratic Party will hold its first ever caucuses on Saturday. There is no word on whether Obama's opponent Hilary Clinton will also make an appearance in the state before then.

A concert to support Obama will be held at the Slowdown Thursday night (see page 53), although there is no word on whether he will attend.

Community Creative Panel

Bemis Center Executive Director Mark Masuoka invites the creative community to a panel discussion about how the city can work together to build a creative community.

The panelists include DJ Brent Crampton, screen printer Joey Lynch, Pulp owner Brigitte McQueen, artist Larry Roots, P.S. Collective founder Amy Ryan and Nebraska Arts Council Executive Director Suzanne Wise. Masuoka will moderate the discussion.

The discussion gets started this Saturday at noon, at the Bemis Center located at 12th and Leavenworth streets.

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