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MapQuest

'Beasts' unite to guide viewer in Fused Studios' first solo show

By Michael Joe Krainak

Last weekend witnessed a number of successful firsts for Omaha-based artist Jeremy Stern and the Big O's newest gallery, Fused Studios which opened his show, "Beasts United." This is the first exhibit in three years for Stern, who has been very busy as the assistant director, curator and BemisUNDERGROUND director at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts.

"Beasts United," which runs until Oct. 11, is also the first solo exhibit for Fused Studios, located in the Dundee neighborhood in Central Omaha at 115 N. 49th Street. Fused Studios, which opened in July, is owned and operated by glass artists Regan Smith and Emily Sommer who both felt that Stern's series of amalgamated creatures, collages and assemblages were "a good fit" for their gallery.

"We love his work," Sommer said. "He fuses, in a sense, many images and mediums into one. It's distinctive, a puzzle and puzzling all at once."

Each of Stern's "Beasts" is an iconic fusion of the official mammal, insect, bird and fossil of a given state in America. For example, the very animated Nebraska Beast is constructed of the white-tailed deer, the honey bee, the meadowlark and the woolly mammoth. The exhibition explores themes of collective identity and landscape iconography through what Stern describes as "the comically absurd form of mashed-together ceramic animals, maps of similar locations turned into creatures and other media with similar transformations."

Fusion also characterizes the mission of this latest addition to the Omaha art scene. "We want to do what we love," Sommer said, "to bring art to the community, not just seeing art in their neighborhood but making it as well." To that end, both Smith and Sommer offer studio space and classes for those interested in pottery and fused glass.

"We guide them, one-on-one, on pot-throwing and painting pre-formed bisque," Sommer said. "We encourage people to come and experiment." Fused Studios is located in a modern storefront just north of the MoJo coffee house at 49th and Dodge streets. Its current hours are noon-8 p.m., Tuesday to Friday, 11 a.m.-6 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., but as of Oct. 11, Monday will be added and the gallery will be closed on Sunday.

Choosing Dundee for their first endeavor was no accident as in all things real estate, location is everything. "We enjoy good foot traffic and Dodge, of course, is always busy," Sommer said. "Our space takes advantage of Dundee's commitment to independent, non-chain business, leisure and dining. Plus, we're good for Dundee too. We're easy to find and within walking distance of most people living here. Our first group show was well attended with feedback like 'great space' and 'happy you're in the neighborhood.' "

Stern and others like him (including John Bruggeman, John Bunger as well as others who made up the first group show) are happy Fused Studios is "in the neighborhood" as the number of galleries that offer their spaces to emerging artists on a rental or commission basis are few and far between. Notable exceptions include the galleries at Hot Shops Art Center, the PS Collective and the Benson Grind, both in Benson, and the Moving Gallery in the Old Market.

This is especially true of area emerging artists who engage less traditional art forms and express an original vision in mixed media, performance art and new media as well as painting and

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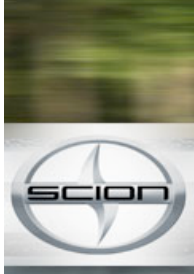
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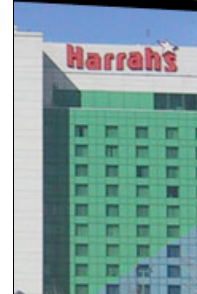
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sculpture. A short list includes Nick Bartlett, Peggy Gomez, Doug Hayko, Noland Tredway, Matt Orand, Matt Walker and Jeremy Stern, as well as several others whose experimental, cutting edge work isn't going to end up in a decorator's studio anytime soon.

What often characterizes the quality of their contemporary art is its origin, concept and expression and even when derivative and shared, its original interpretation identifies it as belonging only to that artist. It's their identity with or without society's approval. It's what makes them interesting and as identifiable as any guitarist recognizable for their signature sound rather than technique or virtuosity.

Stern's signature "Beasts" are truly his own though he acknowledges the influence of such cosmic visionaries as Red Grooms whose vibrant 3-D constructions also melded painting and drawing with sculpture. But while Grooms' cartoon-like characters in his "pictoramas" were often light-hearted satires of human nature, Stern's creatures are more personal and conceptual. Though demonic in appearance he imagines them as more mythological, "along the lines of guides or guardians."

Whether map reconstructions, drawings or clay sculpture, his "Beasts" are personal because they explore locations of his past and present and connections with "relatives I've never met, and how their histories do, or do not affect my life...It became about how to represent a location as big as a state with all the social, environmental and political ideas, and acknowledging how fantastical the collective idea it is through similarly fantastical imagery."

Gradually his work became even more conceptual as he evolved "from familial investigations to a more reflexive response to a confluence of ideas that encompass work, family, fantasy and the current political environment in this country." Yet, the growing seriousness of his work is richly informed by his love of fantasy and "alternate realities presented as social solutions to a problem." As with all good cosmic artists the more you enter their world, the "problems" seem less important, less frightening. The following "Beasts" in this unique exhibit are easy to warm up to:

"Mama's Boy Rises" and "OK USA" both charcoal and conté on paper. These are darker, more forbidding beasts, the first made of Florida's symbols and the second, a collage of Florida, Nebraska, Maine, Illinois and Colorado. The former, part gator, part wild pig, looks angry as if awakened from a deep sleep in his Black Lagoon. "OK USA" is a very busy beast, looking less united and more the result of an experiment gone wrong—think Jeff Goldblum and his chamber of horrors in the final scene of "The Fly."

No less intriguing but more inviting are his "map series," three map assemblages titled "Illinois Otto," "New York" and "Illinois." The first references the former governor of Illinois, Otto Kerner, also Stern's grandfather, whom he never met. Since Kerner's tenure ended in scandal, the title suggests a gangster appellation for Hizzoner, but the state bird, a cardinal etched in graphite in the Chicago suburban setting would seem to suggest that it was just politics as usual for this Land of Lincoln.

"New York" is a very dominant piece as this rather figurative "map" represents several significant locations in the artist's life. One needs to see this assemblage of the state's various symbols from a distance though in order to appreciate the artful proportion of this winged creature, both dominating and predatory. Contrasting nicely with the above is "Illinois," a map of the entire state morphed into the shape of a winged cardinal creature. Unlike "New York," this is less organic, as it is framed and enclosed in glass and would not look out of place hanging in a state office in the capital city of Springfield, perhaps another commentary on the control of the state's economy and politics.

As effective as these works are, the show's signature piece is a mixed media installation in a separate room aptly titled "Legend," with both literal and figurative meaning. Literal, because the six beasts that roam this organic, 3-D topography of their co-joined states, made of map-covered cardboard, are direct references to the legend section of any road map. Figurative, because a legend is part myth and part fact, the ultimate fusion of truth both real and imagined. "Legend" is truly "Beasts United" in a time and place warp, as they roam Stern's cosmic order,



the guides and guardians of his psyche and his fertile imagination.

Bemis Center Silver Anniversary

On Sept. 27 the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts will host a special Silver Anniversary Presentation to celebrate 25 years of transforming people with raw talent into powerful and polished artists. And like every great success story, the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts had a humble beginning.

When Jun Kaneko, Tony Hepburn, Lorne Falke and Ree Schonlau Kaneko originally founded the Bemis Center in 1981, it began as an Artist-In-Industry program that only operated during summer months. But over the past two-and-a-half decades the Center has expanded to become a focal point of the local arts community. It maintains a year-round Artist-In-Residency program, hosts world-class exhibitions, provides educational programming and is home to the bemis UNDERGROUND curatorial program.

The Bemis Center's Silver Anniversary Presentation will begin at 6 p.m. The event will include a special presentation by co-founder Ree Kaneko and is free and open to the public.

Clipped Munch paintings back on display

Two Edvard Munch paintings that were stolen during a daylight raid more than two years ago have finally been recovered and will be on display at Norway's Munch Museum over the next few weeks.

Masterpieces "The Scream" and "Madonna" were lifted from the museum in 2004 when two armed men ripped them from the wall. Police eventually recovered the paintings last August after a series of arrests. The men charged with the theft received prison sentences of four to eight years.

The museum reported slight damage to the paintings, but said they will begin the restoration process and believe that both the paintings can be repaired.

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