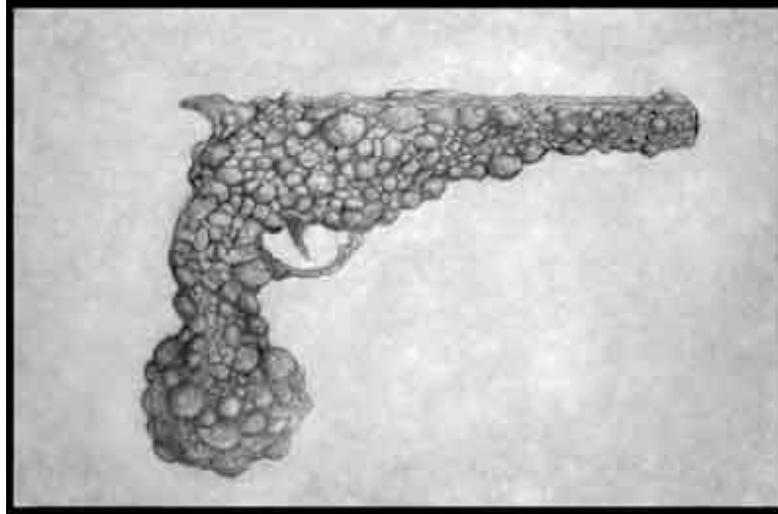


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Two fantastic Bemis shows start the year

by Sarah Baker

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The Bemis Center for Contemporary Art challenges its viewers this winter with two shows: Building a Legacy: Drawing and State of the Art. One pushes the boundaries of a medium; the other challenges all Nebraska artists. Both give viewers a lot to think about.

Building a Legacy is former Bemis Curator Jeremy Stern's final turn in Gallery 1. He goes out with a bang. I expected work that fit in purely and simply with the title (drawing), and I got much, much more. Stern looked beyond paper, pencil and line and gathered artists who draw, certainly, but who do it in unexpected, entertaining and thought-provoking ways.

He writes in his curatorial notes that drawings are often viewed as "prep work," and many see them as inconsequential as a result. As if they serve as the appetizer to the main course. Through this exhibit, Stern shows the importance and versatility of the medium.

Timothy Guthrie's large-scale installation piece is so varied and large in idea and scale, it captivated my attention for several minutes. "Homage to Hibakasha" has a large, pinkish face projected on the wall in the center of a large group of intimate closeup portraits. Almost all the people are smoking. Tiny origami birds fly in front of the wall. The piece challenges the traditional notions of drawing.

The Kent Bellows' work also challenges drawings but in a different way: through sheer skill and, of course, photographic appearance.

Hajime Mizutani's installation, "Untitled," created during his memorable Bemis residency, was a choice pick. The large-scale, crunched paper installation is the most sculptural drawing I've seen.

The show is worth seeing if only to remind that drawing is more than an afterthought in the creative process.

State of the Art is full of Nebraska's best and is almost overwhelming in



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scope. The artists herein are all worth noting: Jamie Burmeister, James Bockelman, Mary Zicafoose, Santiago Cal, Ann Gradwohl, Eliska Morsel, Guthrie, Aaron Holz, Leslie Iwai, Susan McGilvrey, Marjorie Mikasen, Troy Muller, Robert Schwieger and Bill Shaffer. They are showcased because they received 2007 Individual Artist Fellowship Awards from the Nebraska Arts Council. It makes sense why the NAC would choose to honor such a strong and diverse group.

Bockelman's small mixed media pieces caught my eye immediately. They are cleverly installed in a straight line across one gallery wall; their deep hue and texture are attractive from afar. The texture of his large-scale piece attracted me. Burmeister's work always draws me in. This time I was beckoned to tinker with chairs installed in the gallery until I made some bowls "ting" and a jar scoot across the floor. (The piece, in fact, continued to sing as I checked out the other Bemis galleries.)

Holz' three small circular paintings were engaging, and his singular technique keeps me coming back for a second look. I loved Iwai's giant black tulip, installed in Bemis' center hallway. Its textural elements — newspaper, feathers, light and dark tones all encased in vinyl — felt naughtier the longer I looked at it (though I don't think this was probably her main goal).

The entire show was great. No one should overlook Mueller's large-scale paintings in the back gallery. What's better than a large painting of crumpled, half-eaten fast food with a poem around the frame: "If all the world were apple pie/and all the sea were ink/and all the trees were bread and cheese/what should we have to drink?" Perfect.

Building a Legacy: Drawings and State of the Art: 2007 Nebraska Arts Council IAF Recipients continue at the Bemis Center, 12th and Leavenworth, through Feb. 23. A free panel discussion concerning State of the Art is Feb. 9 at noon. For more information, visit bemiscenter.org.

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