

N·O·A·R

THE NEW ORLEANS ART REVIEW

A JOURNAL OF ANALYSIS

FEBRUARY / MARCH / APRIL / MAY 2011



Justin Forbes: *I'll Show You Mine if You Show Me Yours*. O/C, 36" high.



Justin Forbes: *I'll Show You Mine If You Show Me Yours.* Oil, 56" high

Structure & Chaos

BY KATHY RODRIGUEZ

JUSTIN FORBES
KRISTA JURISICH
Jonathan Ferrara Gallery

PAUL CAMPBELL
Heriard-Cimino Gallery
New Orleans, LA

THREE EXHIBITIONS AT two galleries, Jonathan Ferrara and Heriard-Cimino, explore similar content and media. The paintings and collages of Justin Forbes, Krista Jurisich, and Paul Campbell range from high degrees of representation to non-objectivity, showing a slice of the spectrum of formal possibility. But form does not entirely comprise their meaning – their subjects seem to be linked by ideas of disorder, uncontrollable events, and the relationship between structure and chaos.

In "Halcyon Days" at Jonathan Ferrara, Forbes shows a series of texturally flat, figurative oil paintings created in the past year – according to the gallery, his first major

body of work since his removal from the city during Katrina. The subject matter – street scenes, dimly lit bars, varied characters caught mid-gesture – narrates a personal mythology steeped in youthful anarchy. Images of current culture were originally against an academic norm, butted against authority and structure. Forbes' use of this subject matter places his paintings in the genre of social realism, particularly the Ashcan School, which emphasized the underbelly of urban life. The scale is approachable and forthright; the sub-narratives of Forbes' overall story fit neatly into the window of the picture plane.

Stylized color and line struggle against these confines. Though there is evidence of the influence of Alice Neel in the sensuous curves and contours, and seemingly arbitrary but expressive color, that Forbes uses to paint his characters, his palette is more intense. Forbes' saturated color joins with a skewed perspective that lingers somewhere above and right in front of the primary (and authoritative) figure in *McQueen's Blvd.* The formal qualities evoke dreamscapes or acid trips, places and drugs that are outside the realm of conventional rules, but also means for finding sense in the waking world. Burlesque figures interrupt the order



Krista Jurisich: *Out of Pocket - Pass the Buck*; Mixed media on board, 31.5" high.

and geometry intrinsic to a pool game – even a beer-soaked one – at Mimi’s bar in *Social Networking*. Both paintings depict a spontaneous energetic disorder that is youth at play.

Balthus might appreciate the eroticism suggested by a peculiarly posed pool cue and the curious gazes of two children in *I’ll Show You Mine if You Show Me Yours*. Sexual discovery is part of the adolescent journey on which Forbes’ characters find their way. But, the iconography of this piece symbolizes the process of creation and destruction, life and death – it is almost a contemporary *vanitas*. From the middle ground near a trailer, a pregnant woman watches over two boys and their pool cue in the foreground. Behind her, a father-figure cooks meat over a charcoal grill. To her right, a little girl opens her underpants to the rapt gaze of a little boy. Each character is so isolated and privately engaged that the looming presence of an approaching tornado goes unnoticed. It is a narrative of the process of procreation: revelation, sexual encounter, conception, and birth. But, food and entertainment, the indulgent pleasures of human life, eventually meet an insurmountable end, the ultimate order of things.

Out of Pocket - Pass the Buck, a collage-drawing by Jurisich in “The Theatre of Culture Strata” at Ferrara, uses more traditional *vanitas* iconography. A huge skull looms at the center;

a globe suspends from a human hand to its left. There, tradition stops. Eyeballs watch from all angles, and authority figures peer at the viewer from behind grass at the bottom of the picture plane. A squid and whale struggle in a battle for survival to the right. This is an image of the diorama at the American Museum of Natural History, suggesting that the piece is didactic. The viewer should learn, from the money bills layered in the background, that finances structure this world – and this world is fleeting. However, the juxtaposition of Caravaggio and candy in the upper left of the composition suggests meaninglessness. Though Caravaggio was a rebel and a revolutionary, he is part of the canon of art history – his work is currently part of the textbook survey. Put in the same composition as a big sweet jelly mold, the order and authority is cancelled out.

By its nature, collage challenges order. It is rooted in the belief that content is created from chaos. It is automatic, a deposit of the sediments of culture pieced and glued together from clippings. Jurisich literally translates this in *Needle in a Haystack*, a giant relief of objects culled from local overflow sites and former barrier islands cemented together on a support. This is the only control Jurisich has over the work, and it is one of the most activist of her pieces. The amalgamation of pictures, glass, trinkets, and money, probably priceless to those who once owned them, are meaning-



Paul Campbell: *Koosh 6*, 2011; O/C, 60" high.

less now. Jurisich categorized other objects in apothecary jars that evoke specimens – the original identity of the pieces are lost; they are simply dead evidence. But, maybe the title implies a tiny grain of life – a solution to cultural conundrums by searching deeply through all this chaotic detritus.

CAMPBELL'S *KOOSH* AT HERIARD-CIMINO is controlled chaos. It isn't difficult to guess how Clement Greenberg would feel about the artist's use of the kitschy koosh ball as a painting tool. But the resulting work is essentially Abstract Expressionist, an image of the indexical signs of the artist's gesture. Campbell admits that he parodies the style; in these works, he threw the paint-soaked ball, which resembles an anemone, at an atmospherically colored canvas. He is irreverent, literally throwing paint in the face of painting. It begs whether a koosh is any different than a brush, or a stick, or string – another painting tool favored by Campbell.

The result is decorative – something of a blow to the authority oil painting conveys. The scars left by the koosh

resemble chrysanthemums (symbols of death, interestingly) and interlace with dramatic, chandelier-like drips. The paint itself has a low relief, more like a print; the finished form resembles handmade wallpaper. Campbell paraphrases Duchamp, embracing the element of chance. The work is controlled from beginning to end. The layers of paint show the history of his process, the manipulation of color and line to a desired effect.

Each artist subjects the process of painting, a medium with great historical gravity, to humor and play. The subjects of their paintings – grand themes of order and chaos – are weightier than the connotations of the medium. Nothing is humorous in the end; it might be an imbalance between the severity and the silliness, or the inherent difficulty of refreshing traditional themes. But, the pleasure of looking is enough to encourage deeper consideration – and that, within the fast pace that characterizes our lives, is an achievement in itself.

