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Thursday, January 10, 2008



A bit extra

CAC's first show of 2008 spotlights serious new talent

by JARRET KEENE

IT HAD BEEN A LONG WHILE

since this column last checked in with the Contemporary Arts Collective, a local nonprofit arts group and a fixture in the Las Vegas arts community for years. Several factors contributed to our shortchanging of the space, but the main reason was the gallery's shuffling from the Arts Factory to the Holsum building and back again, which suggested, at least to this writer, CAC had yet to find solid footing. It has now, largely thanks to the appointment of a gallery director, the very lovely Beate Kirmse. She was on hand on Jan. 4 to greet First Friday attendees, and kind enough to introduce me to the three scruffy, twentysomething artists whose work comprises the new group exhibit on display, extra.ordinary. Indeed, Zak Ostrowski, Grayson Ronk and Barret Thomson are young guns, and their presence at CAC suggests fresh blood has somehow infused itself into a collective usually reliant on the patronage and artistic contributions of older generations. (No offense to Gen X-ers and Boomers! You guys still rock out like, er, Neil Young.)

The work that first caught my eye is by Thomson, who provides portraits of -- check it out -- the artists included in the show. A UNLV art school grad, Thomson says in his artist statement, and in person, his work explores "ideas closely associated with the conceptual idea behind the panopticon, an idea that allows the viewer to observe all with the people being completely observed, completely unaware of this." I nodded when he related this insight into his process, but actually I didn't quite understand what he was talking about. (There is nothing remotely surveillance-related about his paintings that I can discern.) Instead, I simply relished the exquisite draftsmanship of these



Barret Thomson's sketch of fellow exhibitor Grayson Ronk

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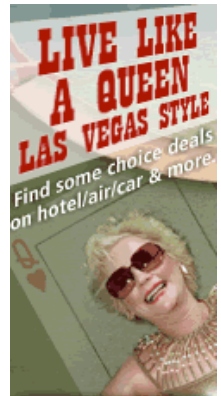
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large (4.5-foot-by-8-foot) oil canvases. So powerful and cleanly rendered are his lines, even I'd consider commissioning him to paint my portrait. Thomson is a talent who makes portraiture look effortless, and the fact his subjects were also in attendance helped to confirm his accuracy of eye and attention to detail. Thomson also contributes a handful of sketchbook pages (pencil on paper) that, although they initially seem tagged on at the last minute, reveal even more of his technical (rather than conceptual) process.

Next up: the striking abstract mixed-media paintings of Zak Ostrowski, another UNLV grad (only this time with a masters degree in architecture) with a dreamy yet aggressive style that somehow manages to distance itself from the genre of psychedelic-inspired work of a headshop blacklight poster. Like Thomson, Ostrowski provides an indecipherable artist statement, but his work clearly borrows from the competing disciplines of architecture and ancient myths to fashion something new, edgy and very attractive -- a rare trifecta for most artists. His largest work, "Clearly a Sky Machine," almost consumes the entire gallery with its visual power, its raw and cosmic intonations nearly dwarfing the smaller abstract paintings that, on their own, are quite exceptional in their own right. Ostrowski's work is a lot of fun to bask in, and you could spend an hour charting the weird grids and mythic figures that populate his canvases.

Finally, there is Grayson Ronk (like Thomson, a UNLV art grad), whose work lies at the opposite end of the spectrum, leaning toward the super-minimalism of Gerard Richter. His whitewashed photorealist-images (graphite on paper) give his subjects a ghostly sheen, whether he's focusing on a "Broken Sprinkler" or a "Bentley S2." Ronk is more clear in articulating his intent, which is to create "an echo or a haunting of the original photograph," and he accomplishes what he outlines. Unlike the others, he also possesses a sense of humor, especially in a work like "Rejected Passport Photo (Glenn)," where you can barely detect the imprint of a little child's face. Was it rejected because Glenn (whoever he is) submitted a childhood photo, or was it due to the kid's uneasy expression? Either way, it's a hoot. Ronk also provides an aluminum sculpture of a "Fuji Fine Pix" disposable camera that initially suggested someone had left their camera behind in the gallery.

While its title may be a little presumptive, extra.ordinary still gives CAC an extra boost in the youth department, and it's impossible to deny each of these artists wields significant talent. It's a new year, and this show serves as evidence CAC is re-committed to sticking to its mission statement of presenting "new, high-quality, visual and performing art." We look forward to many more shows of this caliber.

extra.ordinary

Through Jan. 26



Thomson's finished portrait of Ronk

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