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Winners take all

CAC's 20th Annual Juried Show succeeds on every level

by JARRET KEENE

FOR all the journalistic tears shed over the recent demise of the Las Vegas Art Museum, perhaps there's a lesson to be learned from observing the Contemporary Arts Center as it continues to put on one modestly successful and relatively ambitious show after another without having to worry too much about pleasing super-wealthy patrons. What is the lesson? Not sure, but I expect it has something to do with emphasizing creativity over egos. Yes, there have been a lot of big changes for CAC in the last year, particularly with the appointment of Beate Kirmse as Executive Director. Her presence has reinvigorated the nonprofit, allowing for some interesting shows, including last year's *Beneath the Neon* (an "adaptation" of Matt O'Brien's nonfiction account of life in the Las Vegas storm drains). Also, exchanging the word "Collective" with "Center" is a subtle but crucial move suggesting there's less (messy) democracy under Kirmse's direction, which is a good thing. Too many cooks in the managerial kitchen is rarely, if ever, beneficial.

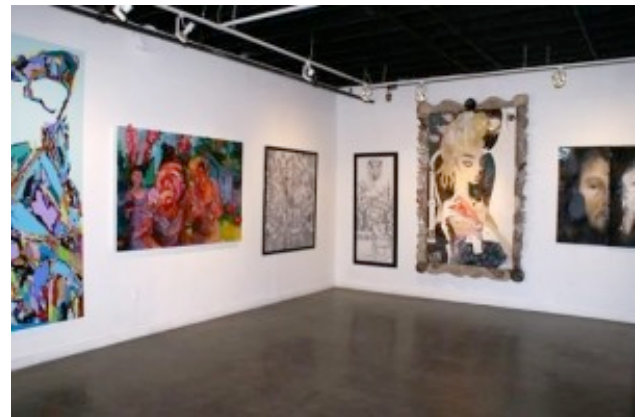
And CAC has benefited greatly, especially in terms of organization. Just for starters, the nonprofit's website is routinely updated, which means the moment I began to wonder what the new exhibit would be this month, all it took was a few clicks of the computer mouse to get excited about driving over to the Arts Factory. In case you haven't heard, CAC's 20th Anniversary Juried Show is now on display, and it offers so many great works that Kirmse has let the the show leak into the anteroom outside the center's interior entrance, greeting visitors with visual treats before they've even found the door.

Overall, I was pleasantly surprised by the show's consistent tone: pop yet thoughtful, lighthearted yet serious in terms of form, colorful yet fiercely engaged with life, surreal yet never lapsing into postmodern vacuity. Whenever I approached a piece, I could sense each artist's effort to please, instruct and disturb. Obviously, this isn't easy to do, but when something like food-obsessed Wendy Kveck's swirling, coruscating "From Roses to Roasts" grabs your eyes, there's no other way to describe the combination of impulses at work. Kveck lures in viewers with what on the surface resembles rose petals. It's only when you get closer that you realize these aren't flower-faced femmes laughing at you. They're meat-masked creatures that would make just as much sense on the cover of a death-metal album. Indeed, in the spate of single viewing, Kveck made me think about the organic thread that runs through vegetable and animal matter, about the dearth of humor in contemporary art, and about the vague sense that the artist is commenting on the hidden violence of both the culinary world and commercial gardening.

Another superb piece is Aaron Sheppard's "A Debutante's Eclipse," a dark portrait of a Cruella de Vil-like woman, her sinister gaze palpable enough to distract viewers from the self-inflicted (and labial-looking) wound oozing on her chest. The frame Sheppard fashioned for "Eclipse" is almost as interesting as the work it holds, with gothic flourishes that tempted me to reach out and touch. As far as sculptures go, Bryan Ambacher's "Meat Prince" elicited a chuckle. Inside a wooden box a stupidly grinning chubby boy doll -- blood smeared on his lips and fingers and a McDonald's fry

20th Anniversary Juried Show

Through March 24
Contemporary Arts Center
107 E. Charleston Blvd., Suite 120
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Selections from CAC's current juried art show

container on his head -- watches as a fork-skewered cow bleeds to death in front of him. Meanwhile, a pile of cattle skulls threatens to topple over.

There's more grotesque horror on hand in the form of Richard Gale's "Stages of the Heart," an acrylic-based painting in which smeared, bleeding hearts hang in space. Like the sweet, blurry aggression of a My Bloody Valentine rock song, "Heart" is a confrontation that retains a delicious veneer, and I had to stand in front of it for several minutes to determine how exactly he'd achieved this powerful effect. There's also Don Michael Jr.'s "Silence Gives Consent," in which a nighttime cityscape is interrupted by the presence of a giant human skull. Maybe it's all in the context, but the idea that looming foreclosures threaten to plunge the nation into the Great Depression II made me think Michael might be onto something.

Even work that might otherwise seem more academic-minded functions well in this space. Take, for instance, Elizabeth Blaus' two-part "Hydro-Tubes," which despite being acrylic renderings of tubular abstractions somehow holds its own amidst the glitter and doom. So, too, does the punkish pop of Greg Stahl's "Rock and Feking Roll," a halo-ed Elvis Presley created with spray paint, and "Meathawk Revenge," in which a punk-rocker wields a Mohawk of, well, meat. Juror Shana Nys Dambrot deserves credit for selecting these works by Las Vegas artists; after all, the Venice, Calif.-based Dambrot has written for edgy art magazines like Juxtapoz and is currently an editor at Flavorpill.com.

Whatever the case, CAC's juried show is a testament to the talent and imagination of the artists of Southern Nevada. In a moment when the Vegas scene seems to be suffering a series of terrible blows, it's important for anyone who appreciates visual art to experience this show. It will lift your spirits even as it troubles your mind with its ominous imagery.