



Charlotte Street Fund • 2002

Nov.10, 2002 - Jan. 22, 2003

Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art



Davin Watne, *Gently*, 2002, cardboard, tissue paper, wood, 228" x 72" x 56", courtesy of the artist, Kansas City, MO

Davin Watne

We are surrounded by objects of desire, not objects of use. –Sociologist Donald A. Norman, *The Psychology of Everyday Things*

Gently reveals Davin Watne's attraction to the absurd. The work is the product of an obsessive, time-consuming process that transformed something small and mundane into something large and heroic. Watne began his work by taking measurements from a toy model of a 1971 Dodge Charger. From these, he established X and Y coordinates, from which he constructed the cardboard pieces that fit together to form the sculpture's internal construction, or "skeleton." *Gently* further explores Watne's interest in the analogous relationship between car bodies and human bodies. Like human bodies, cars possess distinct parts that together create an integrated, functional unit. Both bodies possess sensuous curves full of potential. Humans and cars even share parallel resting places if their bodies are beyond repair – the cemetery and the junkyard. Watne's *Gently* emphasizes these parallelisms and more.

At the opening of this exhibition, Watne will break open the front end of *Gently*. From this infliction will pour candy, transforming Watne's cardboard curiosity into a most unconventional piñata, an allusion made most clear by the car's frilly pink paper "skin." This action foregrounds an element of simultaneity – that human bodies are often injured when cars bodies are injured. In this regard, the candy spilling from the car's open wound operates symbolically as life-giving blood escaping the body. For the artist, this allusion has profound personal

meaning relating to an automobile accident in which he was involved in 1996, an experience that has inspired a large body of work featuring a variety of accidents, crashes and explosions. Evoking the trauma of bodily harm, *Gently* also suggests that injury can carry rewards of a certain type. In addition to the form of a festively decorated hollow container, Watne has appropriated from the Latin American tradition of the piñata the concept of a desirable prize – the candy – obtained through violent means. In this way, *Gently* highlights the relationship

between fame and death, a connection that springs to mind the many legendary figures whose fame has been accentuated by the abrupt means by which they lost their lives. Among these, James Dean, Jackson Pollock, Princesses Grace and Diana, and, most recently, Dale Earnhardt – who all died in violent car crashes – spring to mind most quickly. From this perspective, *Gently* encourages us to contemplate the intimate relationship between our culture's love of cars on one hand and our fear of dying on the other.



Lori Raye Erickson, *Gay Scout 1-50*, 2002, enamel on masonite, 60" x 79" courtesy of the artist, Kansas City, MO

Lori Raye Erickson

Some painters ... do not care what chair they are sitting on ... They do not want to 'sit in style.' –Painter Willem de Kooning, "What Abstract Art Means to Me"

Lori Raye Erickson does not "sit in style." Her work is conspicuously diverse, varied in media, materials and content. Her eclectic method is most immediately apparent in two large related assemblages, *Baby* and *Darling*. The pair offers a meditation on the experience of growing up poor. *Baby* features a girl in a bunny costume holding a cup emblazoned with the title of the piece. Suggesting growth and maturation, a height chart found by the artist occupies the left side of the composition. Multiple evocations of childhood similarly comprise *Darling*, including a lead sheet with large baby pins stamped in relief in the upper right and found wrapping paper across the bottom and lower right.

Erickson's propensity to combine seemingly disparate objects and images yields even more unsettling results in *Pumped Series: Serial Killers*, a group of eight mixed-media compositions. Each composition is broken into stacked registers. The top registers are reserved for images of the notorious criminals, positions suggesting the lofty places they hold in our cultural mythology. Erickson derived these images from *True Crime*, a Time-Life book that served as the inspiration for the series in general.

Suggesting violence and revealing the hand of the artist, an etched line splits each killer's face in half and leads the viewer deeper into each composition, where images of different kinds of pumps evoke the adrenaline rush associated with criminal activity. Elsewhere throughout the compositions, imagery imbues each killer's persona with greater specificity. In the case of Ted Bundy, the bottom register features his infamous Volkswagon Bug, while a teddy bear blown into the glass plate refers playfully to his name.

More pointedly political in content is Erickson's series of 50 enamel paintings on pressboard featuring the bright, smiling faces of friendly scouts. Unlike the homogenous Caucasian boys that populate the 1950s *Boy Scout Handbook*, from which the artist has derived her slick, cartoon-like style, Erickson's troop represents a wildly diverse range of ethnic and cultural types. These include kids who appear variously European-American, African, Hispanic and Asian; punk; "goth"; gay; and, in some cases, androgynous. In executing this group portrait, Erickson plays the role of honorary admissions officer, a position that grants her the authority to define what is "good" and what is "American." Her installation thus offers a biting critique of the well-known and controversial exclusionary policies of the Boy Scouts of America.

May Tveit

I like the artificial limits that the gallery presents ... I don't think you're freer artistically in the desert than you are inside a room.

–Sculptor Robert Smithson, "Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson"

May Tveit is drawn to large, circular straw bales in the landscape as physical manifestations of human activity, past and present. Dotting America's countryside and beyond, bales become rural icons connecting different times and places. Tveit sees them also as poignant symbols of a way of life struggling for survival as land is increasingly subsumed by suburban development.

Tveit explores the bale's spatio-temporal associations in *Crop Circles*. The work consists of six sections cut from the ends of three 2,000-pound bales of wheat straw. These sections – each measuring 10 inches in width and 6 feet in diameter – have been coated by machine with styrothane and sprayed with industrial paint. The artist expects to conduct similar experiments as part of an even more ambitious project in which dozens of full bales undergo this process and are resituated in urban and/or rural contexts. In Tveit's envisioned environmental project, straw bales, usually so peaceful and unassuming, will appear changed dramatically by some superhuman intervention, a disturbance that will likewise alter our



May Tveit, *Crop Circles*, 2002, wheat straw, styrothane, paint, 12" x 72" each, courtesy of the artist, Kansas City, MO

perception of the space we inhabit with them. In creating and installing *Crop Circles*, Tveit has used the gallery space as a laboratory in which to investigate this project's conceptual framework. Filled with epoxy and colorfully painted, each straw circle is frozen in time, preserved beyond its seasonal life span. This process also accentuates the bale's decorative qualities, particularly the spiral design inherent to its man-made form. Surprisingly, the brilliant, seemingly artificial color of each circle is drawn from nature, each rooted in the transition from summer to fall. Tveit's installation of the circles across the wall and the floor furthermore animates them physically and throws the viewer's relationship to the circles into flux. Such creative and ambitious interventions transform mundane, raw material into decidedly hybrid forms – recognizable yet unusual, natural yet man-made, impermanent yet preserved.

Alonzo Washington

Popular culture intervenes in the construction of individual and group identity more than ever before ... –Historian George Lipsitz, "Listening to Learn and Learning to Listen"

... the new cultural politics of difference consists of creative responses to the precise circumstances of the moment ... –Historian Cornel West, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference"

Like most artists, Alonzo Washington understands the power of images. Particularly, he understands the ways in which images embody cultural ideals and define their limits. With his art, Washington aims to expand our cultural ideals pertaining specifically to heroism to include – without reservation or qualification – African Americans.

Throughout the 20th century, American comic book companies – along with other mass-media outlets – have represented heroism as a uniquely Caucasian attribute. For example, Superman's physical appearance – his fair skin and his long, angular nose – denote European-American derivation, despite the notion he hails from a planet far from our own. The ubiquity of characters such as Superman, Wonder Woman and Spider-Man in our popular culture subliminally links fair skin to acts of bravery and morality. The fact that many of these heroes wear red and blue and fight either directly or indirectly for the "American Way" additionally ties whiteness to American-ness.

For 10 years, Washington has been using art and language to disrupt these powerful cultural linkages to send positive messages about African-American identity. As a young comic



Alonzo Washington, Comic books by Omega 7 Inc., 1992-2002, mixed media, 12 covers, 7" x 10.5" each, courtesy of the artist, Kansas City, KS

book enthusiast growing up in Kansas City, Kansas, Washington was struck by the fact that none of America's heroes looked at all like him. He attributes many of the social problems currently facing the African-American community to the lack of appropriate role models in popular culture.

The pantheon of superheros he has created – including Omega Man, Original Woman and Darkwolf, among others – is meant to fill that void. Like their white counterparts, his heroes fight for freedom and justice unabashedly. However, while mainstream heroes typically fight their battles in futuristic, faraway places, Washington's heroes occupy the here and now and confront America's most pressing problems, scenarios that echo the artist's own commitment to community activism. In one issue of Omega Man, for instance, the hero averts a Columbine-type school tragedy. In his first appearance, Darkwolf saves a white child from molestation at the hands of a Catholic priest. Powerful and empowering, Washington's imagery daringly unites art and life and reminds

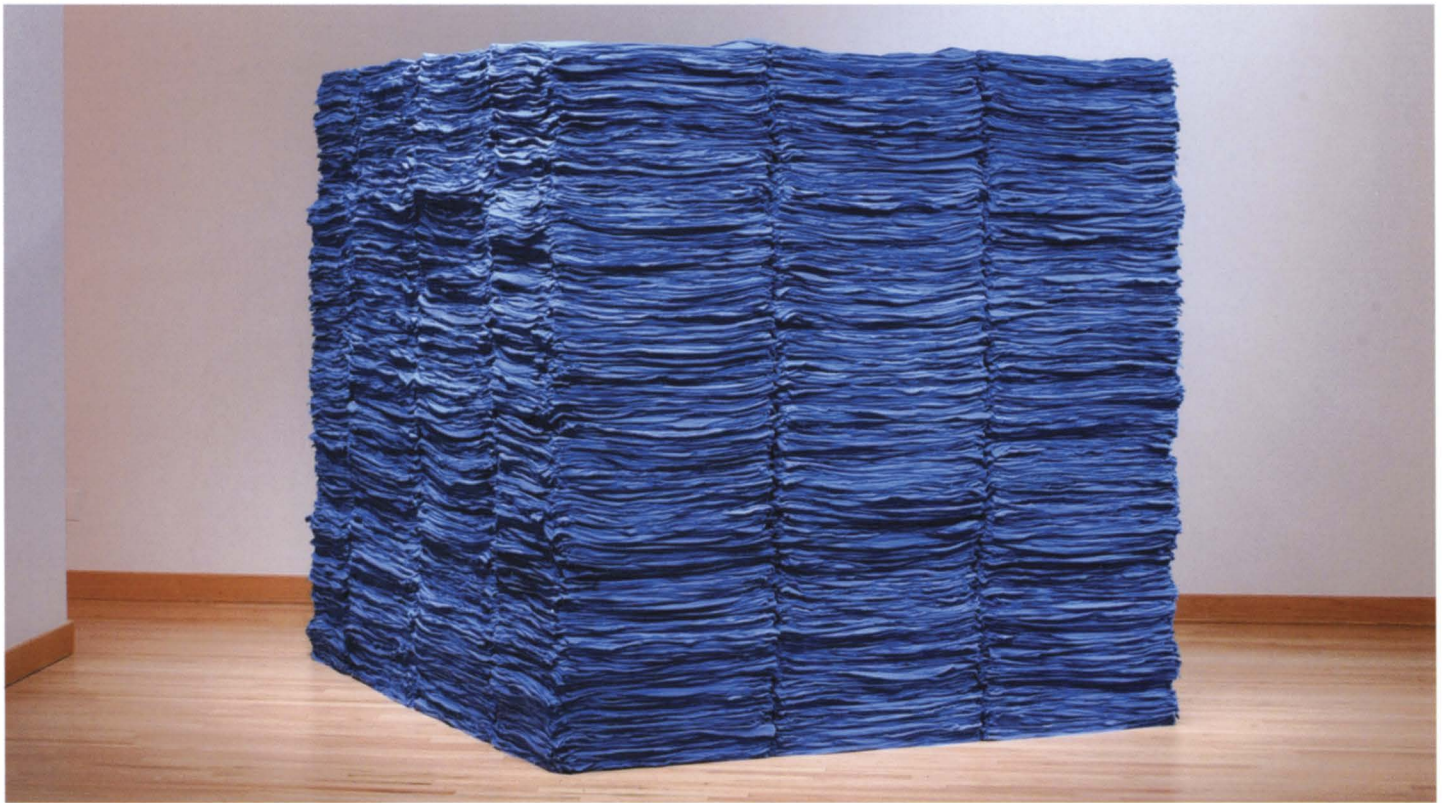
us of the immense role images play in shaping cultural identities and ideals.

Marcie Miller Gross

Color is whatever comes out of the material and keeps it what it is. –Artist Eva Hesse, *Art Talk: Conversations with Twelve Women Artists*

Marcie Miller Gross' work is emphatically and poetically materials based. As artist, Gross facilitates the material's self-expression – the conveyance of its color, its texture, its unique history – through careful consideration of form, composition, proportion and repetition. Her most recent work has explored the capacity of used, worn and stained towels to convey human presence through their tactile qualities related to intimacy, warmth, comfort and touch.

In *Mass*, Gross utilizes used blue surgical towels, cloth replete with provocative associations relating to the human body and life and death because of the key role they play in invasive, often high-stakes, medical procedures. The artist painstakingly organizes hundreds of these



Marcie Miller Gross, *Mass*, 2002, used surgical towels, 74" x 83" x 84", courtesy of the artist, Kansas City, MO

towels into a cubic mass standing more than 6 feet high. A commanding presence in the gallery, Gross' structure is composed of two walls consisting of three stacks and two walls consisting of two. This dense concentration of a single substance amplifies the material's inherent properties, both physical and associative.

Formally, *Mass* explores the mounting weight, physicality and compression of the material and the tension it creates in a fixed space. Placed off center with one corner near a gallery wall, this otherwise inert bulk is energized by the asymmetrical space in which it resides. Conceptually, *Mass* engages the sensory experience of accumulation. Laid flat, each towel lets loose of its edges. Spilling from the vertical material masses, these exposed edges offer enriching dimensions of irregularity and chance to the overall composition, otherwise rooted in rigorous repetition.

These naked edges furthermore ensure that *Mass* is outward directed, that the piece "speaks" with a clear, strong voice. Clearly faded and worn, the towels admit their function and their history, which – like the stacks they comprise – accumulates over time. Exposure and repetition also assert the towels' "blueness," which varies subtly from towel to towel, depending on age and amount of use. However, the overall appearance of color is monochromatic, a cool, radiant blue, an effect that is inseparable from the material itself. For Gross, this blue is evocative of a mystical sensation or space, a

hue reminiscent of the color describing heavenly realms in frescoes painted by Giotto. From this perspective, *Mass*, a work that is expressly materials based, broaches the metaphysical, bridging the gap between the physical and the spiritual.

Tammi Kennedy

I am for an art that embroils itself with the everyday crap & still comes out on top.

–Sculptor Claes Oldenburg, from *Store Days*

Tammi Kennedy's *Palettes* look like pallets, but they do not "act" like them. Typically, pallets are valued only for their functional capacities. They usually reside on the floor and suffer beneath the weight of material goods they were, in a way, born to serve. Kennedy lovingly adopts what others generally disregard. She elevates the pallet to the realm of "high" art by mounting her tape sculptures on the wall rather than leaving them lie on the floor.

This transformation is furthermore tied to the process by which she executes her work. Kennedy has "copied" each of her sculptures directly from actual wooden pallets she found and selected. Each of these she subsequently wrapped in tape. After "casting" each piece of each pallet completely, she carefully cuts it free from its sticky mold. Kennedy's attention turns then to the remaining "skins," which she meticulously reassembles to mimic the shape of the original.

By casting pallets in tape, Kennedy drains them of their proper function and emphasizes their latent aesthetic attributes. Previously, she has explored similar ideas by wrapping chairs, ladders and even a baby crib. The pallet, however, has proved to be an especially fruitful subject for exploration. It offers the artist a regular geometric format with which to explore the expressive potential of a limited formal vocabulary. Furthermore, because of its exceptionally functional *raison d'être*, the pallet is particularly successful in facilitating Kennedy's drive to invest the mundane with beauty.

The material with which Kennedy works plays an equally important role in this process. Like a pallet, a chair or a ladder, tape is typically appreciated only for what it can do for us – mend a tear, seal a package. In contrast, Kennedy is drawn to it for its tactility, the subtlety and range of its color, and the various ways in which it responds to light. Depending on its variety, the tape alternatively reflects, refracts or absorbs the light from above. Light also casts shadows around the work on the wall, expanding each sculpture beyond its physical bounds. Vaguely geometric yet painterly, assertive yet haunting, Kennedy's sculptures offer intriguing and beautiful contradictions.

All essays by Randall Griffey
Assistant Curator of American Art
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

The Charlotte Street Fund

The Mission

The mission of the Charlotte Street Fund is to support and recognize outstanding visual artists in Kansas City. The visual arts represent a tremendous cultural strength in Kansas City, and the city benefits from the many artists who choose to live in the area.

At a time when grants for individual artists have been eliminated by federal and state agencies, the need for such an effort is particularly warranted.

Grants from the fund are for recognition of outstanding work and represent a small thank you to each artist for his or her creativity and hard work. The name of the fund is derived from a long-standing group of artists who gather for food, fun and friendship in midtown Kansas City.

Grants

Grants are for the unrestricted use of the artist. They will be awarded annually to artists living in the greater Kansas City area who are actively creating work – based solely on the merits of their work, in the judgement of the advisors to the fund. No applications are accepted.

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The Charlotte Street Fund is a field of interest fund administered by The Greater Kansas City Community Foundation; Box 10214, Kansas City MO 64171; www.charlottestreet.org

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Cover: Tammi Kennedy, *Palette V*, 2002, transparent tape, 45" x 45" x 6", courtesy of the artist, Kansas City, MO

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