Perspective: Kansas City

July 12 - Aug. 26, 1998

Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

Shauna Alterio, Trophies, *1984-1998, wood, paint, 35 plastic toothbrushes, 8"x 6'x 5", courtesy of the artist*

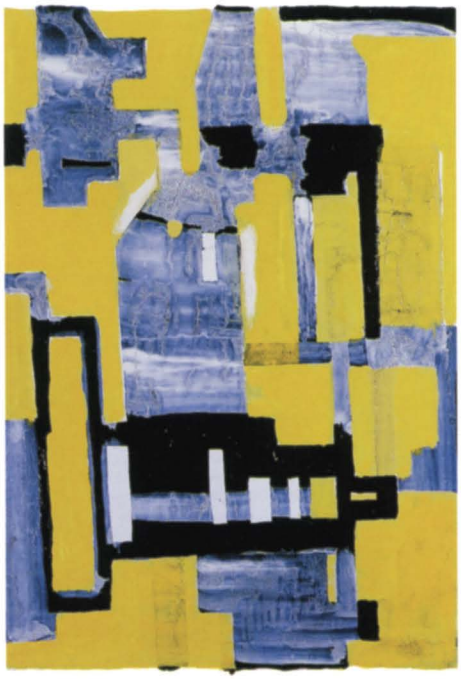
Before directly addressing the artists and works in this exhibition, a few words about the show's genesis might be in order. Curating an exhibition of artists in a city whose art world you don't know very well is like parachuting into unfamiliar territory. One might think that having practically no prior knowledge of an art community could only be a disadvantage. The parachuting critic won't know the histories of individual artists and will lack any sense of how a particular esthetic environment has developed over time. As a result, he or she is at risk of missing all sorts of subtle details and revelations which a local viewer would readily pick up. Further, ignorant of a particular city's network of artistic debts and precedents, the new arrival might respond enthusiastically to the work of one artist without understanding that it had been built on the preceding work of another; what strikes the naive viewer as original may in fact be derivative.

These are only a few of the disadvantages of the outsider's point of view, but, as is usually the case, there's another side to the coin. Blissfully ignorant of the local pecking order and the patchwork of creative claims that develop in any art scene, a critic or curator in the situation I'm describing can only judge the work on its evident merits, unprejudiced by inside information. For me, the fact of having to rely wholly on my immediate impressions was one of the exciting aspects of curating *Perspective: Kansas City*. In New York, where I've been writing about art for nearly 12 years, I sometimes (or maybe that should be "often") find it hard to clear away the accumulated personal knowledge, the sense of loyalties and conflicts, all the social, personal and historical barnacle-like matter that accumulates around the act of looking at and writing about art. Of course, to some degree such accumulations are inevitable, but when they move in from the periphery to occlude the visual experience, the judgment of a critic or curator can become less reliable.

Kathryn Arnold, 100!, *(detail), 1998, oil on canvas, 100 works each 10" x 10", courtesy Leedy-Voulkos Gallery, Kansas City, Mo.*

Looking at the slides of 72 Kansas City-area artists, then visiting the studios of 20 of them, was a refreshing, and challenging, experience for me because I had nothing on which to rely but my own response. I did not know what to expect, nor did I know what kind of show would result from the process. To demonstrate how clear of preconceptions my mind was, I should say that I had almost no expectation of putting together any kind of thematic show, and yet this is exactly what I've done. At the outset, all I hoped for was to find 10 artists to whose work I responded, select pieces from each of them and trust to fate (and a smart installation) that the result would make some kind of visual sense. It was only after I'd finished making my round of studio visits with JCCC Gallery of Art director Bruce Hartman that a theme came to me. The idea arrived almost in a flash, and made so much sense that I knew better than to argue with it.

The artists selected for this exhibition share an interest in repetition and difference, to borrow a phrase from the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. They work by establishing a basic formal or thematic unit and then exploring the possibilities of continuity and variation that it offers. Within this repeating structure, their approaches



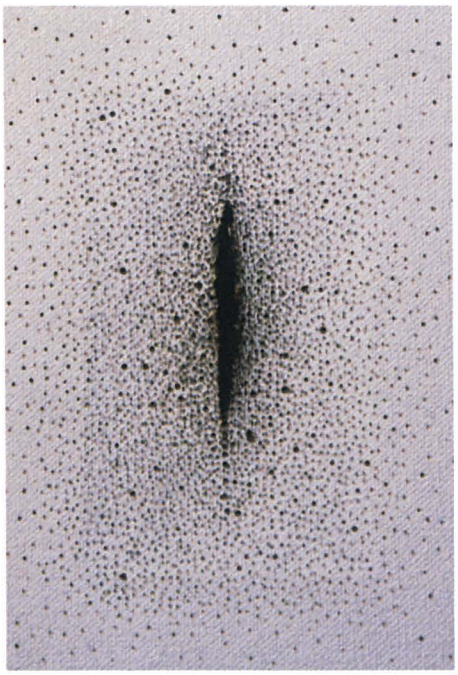
James Brinsfield, Caligari, *1998, oil, enamel, paper, 10½" x 7¼", courtesy Joseph Nease Gallery, Kansas City, Mo.*

range from serial formats to diaristic sequences, from abstraction to autobiography; the mediums represented include painting, drawing, sculpture and film.

The wall sculpture included by Shauna Alterio, *Trophies*, is one of the most explicitly autobiographical pieces in the show. The witty, disarmingly direct work consists of a row of 35 identical toothbrushes, each labeled with the name of someone the artist kissed over a period of 14 years. While *Trophies* is adamantly personal, it also possesses its share of artistic allusions and resemblances. Most interestingly, perhaps, is the serial, modular format Alterio employs, which echoes the geometric sculptures of the Minimalist artists who arose in the 1960s such as Donald Judd and Carl Andre. Her forthright display of everyday objects can also be related to the Neo-Geo artists of the 1980s such as Haim Steinbach, but the cool intimacy Alterio brings to the work makes her very much an artist of the 1990s.

From Monet to Bonnard to Joan Mitchell, one of modern art's most central traditions has been color-rich painting that departs from the experience of landscape to travel the path toward abstraction. Kathryn Arnold is clearly a vigorous inheritor of this

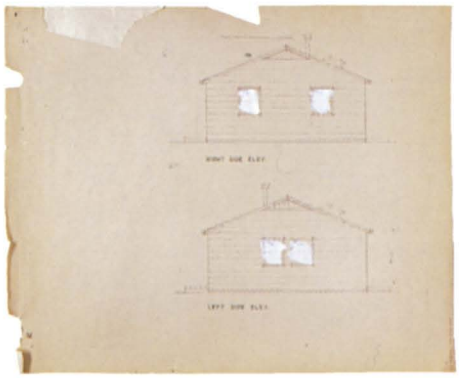
tradition. In *100!*, Arnold presents the viewer with a slightly over 8-foot-square painting in which a myriad of gestural marks, mostly in red, blue and yellow, create a shimmering visual field. What's unusual about *100!*, and what links it to the theme of this show, is that the painting is in fact made from 100 identically



Kyoung Ae Cho, Thirty Three *(detail)*, *1996, burn marks, gesso, canvas, 33 works each 6" x 4½", courtesy of the artist*

sized panels. Each of these 10-by-10-inch canvases is attached to a Velcro backing, so that the entire composition can be rearranged at will. This modular method is uncommon for the style of painting Arnold practices, but in her hands it serves only to enrich the visual and imaginative possibilities of the work.

Since its heyday in the 1950s, gestural abstraction has evolved along strange, interesting paths as the original impetus behind Abstract Expressionism mutated in response to a changing society. One of the ways in which the work of James Brinsfield partakes of this mutation is in its reliance on model and copy. Whereas an earlier generation of painters often sought to achieve an unmediated, improvised composition, Brinsfield builds (one is tempted to say "clones") his paintings in precise relation to small-scale photocopy "sketches." What might seem to be spontaneous pours and marks on the large paintings are, in fact, scaled-up versions of compositions improvised at a much smaller scale. At the same time as he subverts the issue of artistic autonomy, Brinsfield creates works in which various registers of apparently contradictory painterly language collide and overlap.



David Ford, Sucker *(detail)*, *1998, paint, found architectural drawings, 16 pieces each 14" x 17", courtesy of the artist*

An important strain of postwar art has developed out of artists seeking alternatives to the paintbrush. Some of the most striking examples are Yves Klein, who scorched canvases with giant torches and dragged naked, paint-covered models across canvases, and Lucio Fontana, who used knives to cut and puncture his monochrome canvases. The means used by Kyoung Ae Cho are less theatrical, less self-consciously avant-garde than Klein and Fontana, but they share with those two modern masters an open idea of technique. Much of Cho's work is marked by modular form and repeating, labor-intensive and frequently exquisite mark making. In *Thirty Three*, she presents an attenuated row of 33 small canvases (6 by 4 inches). Cho has differentiated each canvas by a pattern of burn marks. The viewer is invited to relish the sensual details that result from this controlled violation of the pristine canvas.

Using a set of found architectural drawings showing elevations of modest, single-family houses, David Ford embarks on a critical examination of the social and political assumptions underlying the postwar dreams of middle-class America. In the planned suburban utopias of the 1950s, neighborhoods were constructed with rows of near-identical houses, each one inhabited by

Nate Fors, inflation (spill), *1998, enamel, oil, collage, rubber, feathers, 7' x 14' (dimensions vary), courtesy Byron Cohen Gallery, Kansas City, Mo.*

a supposedly identical family with the proverbial one car and 2.4 children. Ford mocks this social conformity, which we now view as illusory, by altering the standardized architectural drawings, themselves now tattered and discolored with age. His additions, which range from the subtle to the violent, seem to be exposing the unconscious thoughts of the houses – and those who design and inhabit them.

Because the vast majority of paintings are made on stretched canvas, we tend to take for granted the convention that paintings are flat and either rectangular or square (excepting the occasional circular tondo-style painting). One of the effects of Nate Fors' abstract

Peregrine Honig, Awfulbet *(detail)*, *1998, paper bags, 26 pieces each 10½" x 5¼", courtesy of the artist*

Christopher Leitch, Chance Diaries: December 1997 Dreaming About Sherry *(detail)*, *1997, graphite on paper, 20 pieces each 11" x 14", courtesy of the artist*

compositions on inner tubes is to remind us of the arbitrariness of so many artistic conventions. Fors achieves this only because he is able to make interesting, convincing paintings on his unusual support. Applying bright, Mondrian-like primaries to these mass-produced, expendable, interchangeable products, Fors allows us to see afresh geometric painting. His pneumatic abstractions also serve as a reminder that the very first paintings were probably made not on flat planes but on the curving surfaces of the human body.

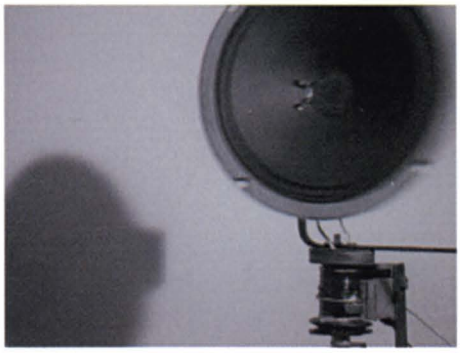
Like several other artists in this exhibition, Peregrine Honig avails herself of an expendable, everyday product – in her case, brown paper bags. On this "poor" support, she has drawn a series of images of young girls, generally clad in nothing more than a pair of white panties. Each of the 26 drawings in the series corresponds to a letter of the alphabet, the initial letter of the girls' names. Honig has also embellished the bags with short rhymes, elucidating the image. While the work is

D.F. Miller, Condenser (the Posten sub-set), *begun 1994-ongoing, string, tin, clockworks, sealing wax, 33 pieces, collection of the artist*

rife with childlike associations, from the nursery-school rhymes to the naive style of the drawings to the bags themselves, which are the kind children often use to carry their lunch to school, the subject matter is anything but childlike. Exploring hot contemporary issues of identity, gender and adolescent sexuality, Honig uses her unassuming material and technique to sneak underneath our psychological and esthetic defenses.

Like a number of other artists in this show, Christopher Leitch works in other mediums besides the one with which he is represented in *Perspective: Kansas City*. His other work has used found objects, embroidery, organic material and processes. Running through much of Leitch's oeuvre is an obsessive interest in combining chance operations and self-imposed systems. Here, we see illustrated transcriptions from one of Leitch's dream journals, this particular set of dreams relating to a single individual in his life. While the dreams occurred and were recorded around 1990, it was not until December 1997 that Leitch turned them into text-and-image drawings. Strikingly candid, and fascinating even if one doesn't know the people involved, this diaristic sequence incorporates chance elements, such as when the artist randomly alternates between his right and left hand to transcribe the dreams.

D.F. Miller is best known for his large-scale, kinetic installations. In these works, complex mechanical systems are used to rotate thousands of bits of plastic through a large interior space. These three-dimensional, moving abstract compositions are marked by hypnotic visual rhythms. In this show, however, Miller is represented by a selection from a more conceptual side of his work, the *Condenser* series. Each individual piece in the series is made the same way. A clockwork mechanism is inserted into a small tin canister. The artist asks someone to wind up the clockwork device, or does it himself. He then immediately inserts small rods that stop the device from ticking. The canister is then closed and sealed. Miller adds information about the date and the person who



James Woodfill, 60 HZ, *1996-1998, 16 mm black-and-white film, 9 minutes, courtesy of the artist*

turned the key that wound up the now-frozen device. Whereas in his kinetic work Miller is interested in putting energy to visible use, here he is preserving energy, storing the action of a single individual. These rows of innocuous cans invite us to imagine what we can't see and to extend our vision ahead to an unspecified moment when the stored energy will perhaps outlast the person who created it.

While the alphabet places James Woodfill at the end of this list, he in fact was the first conceptually – it was his short film *60 HZ* that led me to the repeating-element theme of this show. This 9-minute black-and-white film is made with the same kind of basic components Woodfill uses for his kinetic light-and-sound sculptures. Employing nothing more than some naked light bulbs, low-tech electronics, rotating disks and guitar feedback, Woodfill and his filmmaker collaborators have created a pocket symphony of light and shadow. As it modulates in tone from the ominous to the euphoric, the film sustains a perfect balance between the abstract and the real. The viewer sees how the images are being made, yet is swept almost immediately into their insidious visual and sonic rhythms. Woodfill's work reminds us that at the heart of all visual phenomena are wavelengths of light. Perhaps, ultimately, the myriad repeating structures in this exhibition are consequences of those vibrating light waves that make vision possible.

– Raphael Rubinstein
Senior editor, *Art in America*

Cover: *Shauna Alterio*, Trophies *(detail)*, *1984-1998, wood, paint, plastic toothbrushes 8"x 6' x 5", courtesy of the artist*