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# ART REVIEW: "Makers & Mentors"

By Rebecca Rafferty on February 10, 2010



"Who the hell knows where any of these things come from?" Julianna Furlong Williams joked with the audience last Sunday afternoon, during the artists' talk for the 2010 edition of Rochester Contemporary's "Makers & Mentors" series. This sentiment half describes the approach to creating art defiantly utilized by Williams and her artist hubby, Judd Lawrence Williams, both former art professors at Monroe Community College, as well as two of their former students, Illa Loeb and Elaine R. Defibaugh. Each member of the show's quartet has had the confidence to retain a sense of play and intuition into adulthood, their works reflecting an open process that is about the individual experience of creation and allowing themselves to learn as they go. They insist that the art is not conceptual, and they won't spoon-feed their viewers, but the work still has something secret to offer as its enigmatic forms draw you into the artists' private worlds.

This show is part of the annual "Makers & Mentors" series, but features the added dynamic of the married mentors. The opening reception last Friday drew nearly 600 viewers, says Rochester Contemporary Director Bleu Cease, including many people from out of state who were brought together first in the former professors' classes, and now again, for this exhibit. Cease added that the show, "functions as a bit of a reunion" in that sense, where there was an exciting "reliving of the art-school moment."

Judd Williams' new work is concerned with objects and form, unplanned openness, and he's continuously playing with proximity and color relations. His collaged sculpture work hangs, connects, and arranges detritus in ways that leave the option to make symbolic associations entirely open to the viewer. "Harness Pole" is made of two thin bodies, side by side and anchored to the wall: a bamboo pole and its pieced-together doppelgänger made of rope, metal coils, buckles, straps, and wood. They are bound to one another by wire, but ironically it is the less

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stable-looking of the two that is anchored to the wall and supports the other. At least that's what I saw; who knows what Williams was or wasn't thinking during his curious and compulsive arranging and building.

"Spring Sting" is more obvious: a triptych of broken metal springs anchored high on the wall, with long, brightly colored "stingers" lolling out, like exotic flowers, but more dangerous looking. I am one of those viewers who can't help but hunt for metaphors in art, but to Williams, the meaning is constantly in flux and the seer contributes as much to the work as the maker does. This work is a departure from his older art; he was formerly a printmaker and builder of cartoony sculptures. "Creep" is clever: a small, thin plank of rough wood poking out from the wall, with a giant daub of spray insulation foam, bulbous and slug-like, clinging to the edge.

Judd's work is situated along the same wall as Elaine R. Defibaugh's mixed-media pieces, emphasizing their similar focus on meandering line. Her work takes inspiration from the "correlation between the interior of the body and landscape," she said at the artist talk. She traces the shadows of trees onto various surfaces, and has an obvious cubist influence. By omitting planning and focusing on the shifting, erratic elements of the body and land, chaos becomes the governing element throughout. Meandering line drawings on layered translucent paper emphasize things hidden and revealed; non-representational works have seeming non-sequitur titles, except "Ghost Eagle," with its small white skull, a motion of wings, and a body about to lift off.

Julianna Williams begins her work with no sketching or planning, but by loosely holding the reins, she allows the pictures to become what they are to whomever. Her mixed-media drawings host solitary or small groups of animals, lost in amorphous, indefinite landscapes, at once disturbing and playful. "Large Ant, Small Rabbit" has a sing-songy verse carved out of the painted blue surface. The giant red-and-gold-leafed bulbs of the ant's body dominate the rest of the image, including a small square containing a cowering rabbit's shadow. "Dogs & Berries" is like an illustration from a fairy tale, where the trio of emaciated wolf-like hounds devour floating red clusters of fruit, but can never sate their hunger.

As a mentor, Julianna taught her students how to create "non-verbal, non-literal communication," says Illa Loeb. Loeb describes her work is a culmination of "breaking the bonds of anxiety, grief, all things" that held her back in the past, and kept her from becoming a creator. Her two massive, innocently dark paintings on paper contain house forms anchored to heart-shaped topography or floating in the inky, complicated ether. Her work is a whirlwind, a vacuum, a void waiting for the creator to add and subtract at will, an emotional process in motion.

If you missed the artists' talk, fret not: a video playing in the gallery's round room presents the artist couple discussing their roles as mentors and their processes. Both Judd and Julianna maintain that guiding others in art is a two-way street, with inspiration and education flowing back and forth; a collective, open effort to learn and see and express.

Makers & Mentors

By Judd Lawrence Williams, Julianna Furlong Williams, Elaine R Defibaugh, and Illa Loeb

Through March 21

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