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## ART REVIEW: "Other Worlds" at Rochester Contemporary

By [Rebecca Rafferty](#) on April 21, 2010

You might recognize Paul Knoblauch's style from his colorful, playful benches around town, and the schools of fish swimming through the air at the Fast Ferry terminal. Through May 9 you can view his colorful steel benches, bugs, and birds, fantastically paired with the equally colorful and busy illustrations of John Kastner, at Rochester Contemporary Art Center.

Located at the front of the gallery and facing each other are veritable thrones by Knoblauch (one is a spoken-for commission, and the other available) with wood-plank seats and characteristically whimsical steel legs, arms, and backs soaring skyward. During the opening the seats were consistently occupied by two viewers, so I didn't get the best look at the intricate details until I revisited the next week.

The surfaces of Knoblauch's welded steel shapes shimmer with bright pigment and are punctuated with whimsical cutouts. The space's walls are crawling with the mounted "small bugs" - if you can call the size of a small dog a small bug - and "big bugs." The shiny, colorful curved steel replicates the hard casings of exotic insects, which are extremely pretty, but look like they come from prehistoric times. I could easily picture these as ornaments in a garden or in a child's room, but Knoblauch's website humorously provides pictures of bugs on the walls of offices and the like.

Knoblauch's strong compositions are about balance as much as shape and color, and this comes through perhaps best in the tall bird sculptures. "Big Bird on Ball with Red Spike" is rust colored, on stilt legs, and with simulated metal plumage and holding a vibrant railroad spike in its beak. Other pieces incorporate even more found and recycled objects, like the tank-bodied guy toward the rear of the room.


Most striking is "Lightning Bolt," a fantastic, twin-pronged, jagged line stretching from the floor almost to the gallery's lofty ceiling, a steel totem decorated with balls, rings, floral shapes, and a pair of what I choose to think of as thunderbirds perched on the bolts. Impressive as it was in the gallery, this is definitely a piece I'd love to see (\*cough\* own) outside, perhaps

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"If You Are Standing on Uranus..." by John Kastner, part of the "Other Worlds" exhibit currently at Rochester Contemporary. PHOTO PROVIDED



"Small Bug" by Paul Knoblauch, part of the "Other Worlds" exhibit currently at Rochester Contemporary. PHOTO PROVIDED

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the centerpiece of a rain garden.

The show's other star is old-school illustrator John Kastner. Rochester Contemporary Director Bleu Cease explains that Kastner "wants to talk about the world gone wrong because of cell phones, cars, and cubicles," he says. The artist's ethos shine through in his dense, highly imaginative, cartoon-like pictures. With an extreme sense of depth, dry wit, and complexity, he packs every millimeter of his planes with color-penciled and gouache-painted characters getting into all sorts of confounding trouble.

Kastner's extreme attention to detail makes the 2D worlds practically bust forward from the paper. Characters are swamped and drowning in possessions and the confusing mess we've made of the world. A sort of absurdist humor is present, but there's always a message. Other pieces are funny in a horrifying way: "Hey, what's wrong with Dis Remote?" features a couch-dweller pointing a clicker at an unresponsive TV, entirely oblivious to the havoc he's wreaking on the planet, aflame beyond redemption as it careens through space. A diminutive star ahead of Earth leaps out of the way, and space is not a vacuum, but crammed with nearly hidden characters and symbols. You can't view a Kastner drawing passively.

My favorite Kastner piece is "Mother Nature Wants You Dead," a large painting of a child stepping forward into a world of monstrous flora, fauna, and elements. Thrashing waves, lashing tentacles, and gnashing teeth and claws threaten the babe; not a single safe scrap of land is in sight. A sign beckons the child: "Welcome to life. Watch out!" It's funny because it's true. But paired with any one of Kastner's other moralizing pieces, there isn't really any room for pity - Nature's nature may be vicious, but we're a highly culpable destructive part of it.

The original illustrations for Kastner's book "What' Up with Yuk?", a collaborative project with author Nannette Nocon, line one wall of the space. In the picture book, the same world is occupied by the vastly different existences of the light-hearted character Yum and the stubbornly downtrodden Yuk. My own inner goth desperately wanted to scoff at the stay-positive message, because I don't think it's always possible. But yeah, it's important to try, and without that Eeyore cloud above your head, it's easier to think of solutions for what ails. Within the book is a quote about each person being responsible for their own life, which I agree with, but I also believe in the necessity for compassion and community involvement. But this is included as well: the co-creators seem to have realized that not everyone has the benefit of a strong, loving guide in their lives, and that maybe people who have it together can help those who don't know how to get it together. The book itself is labeled "for all ages," which is interesting, because the message is something I think we all end up relearning in adulthood.

In the LAB Space you'll find Chrissy Welzen's quiet little show of 10 subtly surreal, tiny photo-paint hybrids. Welzen paints atop photographs, but smartly shows her talent by masking off thin edges of the photos and the removing the tape to expose a scrap of the before-paint image. The glimpse also reveals how the photo-real world varies slightly or greatly for each of us, when filtered through our private takes on reality. Her additions result in miniature mythic scenes of glowing air and trembling leaves, paired with a firm structures of branches, hills, or houses here and there.

"Other Worlds"

Through May 9

Rochester Contemporary Art Center, 137 East Ave.

461-2222, [rochestercontemporary.org](http://rochestercontemporary.org)

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