



2007

Powers of Perception

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Recommended Citation

Miles '90, Christopher and Obermiller, Tim (2007) "Powers of Perception," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*: Vol. 16: Iss. 4, Article 3.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol16/iss4/3>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

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Powers of Perception

Christopher Miles '90 examines the visual impact of works by faculty of the School of Art.



Miles Bair guides students through the Faculty Exhibition, which was used as a teaching tool.

Essay by Christopher Miles '90, Introduction by Tim Obermiller



Christopher Miles '90

than three decades ago. The shows — including this year's exhibit at the University's Merwin and Wakeley Galleries — are open to the public. But they are “really more for the students than for anyone else,” says Bair.

Artists like to explore perspective — how looking at something from a different angle or medium can lead the viewer into an entirely different relationship with that object.

This fall's Faculty Biennial Exhibition at Illinois Wesleyan's School of Art yielded a similar shift of perspective, as students accustomed to having their work evaluated by professors were invited to take a close and critical look at those same professors' own creative endeavors.

Miles Bair, director of the School of Art, says that the tradition of showing works by art faculty every other year began more

“Because they study with us, we like to let them know that we’re making work and we’re struggling right along with them and having a lot of the same problems and concerns that they’re dealing with,” Bair adds. “So I think it makes us more of a community of learners together when they see our work, and know what our aesthetic concerns and issues are.”

This year’s show added another layer to this sharing process. Art critic Christopher Miles reviewed the exhibit, which included work by many of the same professors who taught him when he was a School of Art student from 1986 to 1988. Now an associate professor of art theory and criticism at California State University, Long Beach, Miles received the 2004 Penny McCall Award for his work as a writer/curator, and presently writes for *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Flash Art*, *Flaunt*, *Frieze*, and the *Los Angeles Times*.

Miles’ review, which begins below, reflects a keen appreciation for the kind of personal creative vision that Bair says the School of Art has long encouraged. “We let them do their own thing,” Bair says of the art faculty’s attitude toward its students. “We just help them to do it better.” — *Tim Obermiller, Editor*

I count many experiences in different places, and a long list of individuals I’ve been fortunate to have as mentors, as having been formative, but among the most significant coalescences of circumstances and personalities are the two years I spent as a student at Illinois Wesleyan University from 1986 to 1988.

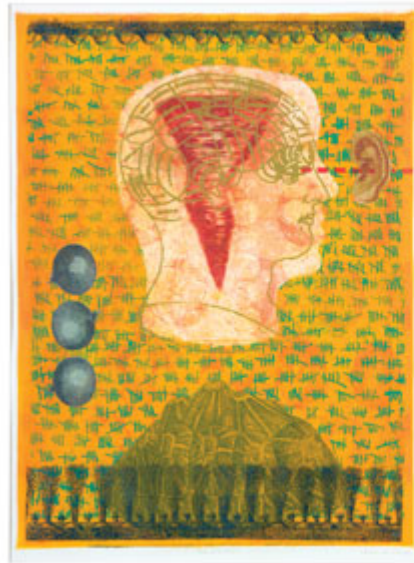
I still remember my favorite seat in the periodicals section of the old Sheean Library, where I grazed art magazines cover to cover; I was often the last out the door at closing time, like a barfly lingering after last call until the lights went out. I wanted to know as much as I could about what was happening in the world of contemporary art, but I also found much of what I saw in those pages lacking. Having grown up in Southern California, and fond of a handful of oddballs who had helped define the Los Angeles art scene of the ’60s and ’70s, I found a lot of what was fashionable in the art of the 1980s disappointing. Even that which was promoted as raw seemed too cool, too well packaged, and that positioned as critical or subversive often seemed formulaic and academic.

I couldn’t have picked a better time to be at IWU, where I gained much greater awareness of, and in many case first exposures to, the work of a collection of Chicago-area artists who had been variously grouped under the monikers of the “Monster Roster,” the “Hairy Who,” and, more generally, the “Imagists.” I was turned onto these artists by a cadre of IWU faculty (including Miles Bair, Timothy Garvey, and Kevin Strandberg, who are included in this exhibition) who shared with the Imagists what seemed an underlying conviction that intensely personal, idiosyncratic imagery could form the base of an art that was neither cryptic nor self-indulgent, but surprisingly accessible and resonant. Though quite varied, the works by the artists included in this exhibition seem clearly to continue to embody that core idea.



Laurel Gate | 48"x 60" | acrylic and silver leaf on canvas | 2007

Miles Bair's recent works are the latest in the artist's long preoccupation with matters of how we consider nature through and within the frameworks provided by multiple forms of cultural edifice. Styles and imagery derived from and inspired by multiple sources rub against one another as areas of Bair's paintings literally frame, corral, crop, anchor, obscure, and reveal one another, resulting in a kind of endless cultural relativity surrounding nature and landscape. Romantic and astute, Bair's works are sly with regard to their multiple engagements of culture(s) — eschewing familiar critiques of the mediation of nature, and instead embracing mediation as a starting point for works as evocative as they are quietly provocative.



Blue Tick Healer | monoprint | 24" x 17.5" | 2007

Behind the Hedges | monoprint | 24" x 17.5" | 2007

Constance Estep's works appear welcoming, decorative, and even rich, but they are also uncomfortable, barnacled, and burdened. The wealth of information and ornament, and the evident care in these works, give way to implications of residue and baggage, habit and compulsion, as the works begin to exude and elicit an anxiety of accumulation. Collage becomes both mode and metaphor in Estep's works, resulting in and referring to the creation of scenarios in which a kind of space — pictorial, psychological, or situational — is derived from layering and grafting.



Tessie | Archival Inkjet Print | 40" x 51.5" | 2006

Marie-Susanne Langille's photographs are reminders of the ability of a photographer with a careful eye to see and record what the rest of us might not notice while looking right at it. Langille's photographs insist on the possibility of locating beauty, wonder, and poignancy in the momentary alignments of subtleties within scenes that might otherwise be viewed as commonplace, incidental, or even marginal. And in the evident care of her photographs she further reminds of the great difference between looking at one moment from the next, or in shifting your point of view as little as a tilt of the head or a step to the side — of becoming an active viewer, and thus a seer.



Accordionists | wood and acrylic paint | 24.5”h x 22”w x 48”d | 2007

As an art historian, Timothy Garvey devotes himself to unraveling the implications of art objects within context; as an artist Garvey produces unassuming, hand-carved objects that, approachable and enjoyable, begin to solicit and elicit implication and association until one finds oneself tangled.

Garvey’s recent work titled *Accordionists*, for example, reaches out to kindred imagery and themes ranging from the archetypal ship of fools, to pilgrims landing at Plymouth to Washington crossing the Delaware, and becomes a kind of open metaphor for any number of embarkations, quests, ventures, or crusades — from the noble, to the daft, to the dubious — of shared purpose, groupthink, communal identity, and pursuit of destiny.



Crocodile Tears |flameworked glass, kiln cast glass, and mixed media |10”h x 10”w x 8”d | 2007

From cast and flame-worked glass, Carmen Lozar conjures and teases the players and props of a dream theater into our world. Storybooks, wind-up toys, dolls, and functional objects all serve as reminders of the possibility of becoming in these works, which, the more you look at them, become more wonderful, yet less fantastic. In fact, the more far out they seem, the more familiar one realizes they are. Like the allegorists, mythmakers, and fairytale tellers whose imaginings we so often make the mistake of believing too concretely or dismissing too readily, Lozar reminds that one can get at truths by spinning yarns.



Tenderness & Stillness | archival digital print | 15”h x 20”w | 2007

Sherri McElroy’s works pay homage to the prairie that is part of her life, and engage the very broad human tradition — known variously to romantics, naturalists, and scientists — of attempting to give image and apply word to human experience with the landscape and its life. An artist/designer immersed in the practice of embodying ideas in textual fusions of image and word, McElroy incorporates the Illustrative, literary, textual, and graphic attempts of others to relate to the landscape of her affection by layering fragments of found texts with her own photographs of the prairie as well as photographs of assemblages and other elements of her own hand. Digitally collapsed and then printed, these layers fuse into an honoring of the landscape, as well as a poetic query into our odd attempts to know it.



#1 ceramic and porcelain 7”h x 12”w x 6”d | 2007

Therese O'Halloran's work long has been concerned with the body, using various ceramic materials and forms to allude to issues of fragmentation and wholeness, connection and disconnection, but her recent work, while among her most simple, is also perhaps the most poignant. Fusing the long traditions of the functional ceramic vessel and the vessel as metaphor or stand-in for the body, O'Halloran's #1 is surprising in its capacity to stir a kind of comedic, social and bodily sense of self.

A riff on the long tradition of the teapot, or the more vaguely termed “spouted vessel,” as a staple of the studio potter, it is suggestive of both a teapot and other containers deemed more suitable for liquid output than intake, leaving the question of use not only a matter of if, but how. Meanwhile, one is left wondering if one shouldn't be contemplating it or relating to it (not to mention the question of whether to address it as madam or sir) instead.



Unsafe – A Hobo’s Warning | Pachinko game, fused, cast, & flameworked glass | 36”h x 24”w x 5”d | 2007

Kevin Strandberg’s sculptures have always dealt in a mix — of media and technique, with found objects and common materials alongside hand-crafted elements in a variety of materials, integrated into elaborate assemblage sculptures; a mix of imagery ranging from the familiar to the fantastic and culled from any manner of cultural sources and periods; and a mix of emotions. Strandberg’s works are consistently playful, but fear and dread are perpetually present, whether looming like the mushroom and funnel clouds that were the specters of his Cold-War-era Midwestern youth, peering from odd openings, or cloaking themselves in disguises of beauty. Friend fades into foe, and folksy and familiar become untrustworthy and uncomfortable in Strandberg’s works, which deal most wonderfully and woefully in a mix of meaning and metaphor that can be a dangerous game.

I have no doubt that it was my exposure to the creative practices of my teachers at IWU, as well as the work of other artists they shared with me, that prepared me to engage a strain of Los Angeles art, similarly inclined toward finding resonance and relevance within the intensely personal, beginning to make itself known just as I was returning to Southern California in the late 1980s, and that helped cement many of my own enthusiasms since. This opportunity to revisit the department, the faculty I knew then, and the new faculty they have brought in to join them has reminded me of what a rich and rare experience this faculty provided me, and continues to provide for other students. — *Christopher Miles, October 2007*