

A is for Abstract  
R is for Real  
S is for Space

Space Oddity  
Joseph Nease Gallery  
June 8-30

Marcus Cain

If you happen to be looking for a well-spring of the current contemporary Kansas City-Style Abstraction everyone's trying to put their finger on lately, look no further than the June exhibition, *Space Oddity*, at Joseph Nease Gallery, or better yet, look beyond the exhibition's 12 artists to the gallery's director, Joseph Nease. More than any individual artist in this exhibition, Nease has managed, in the four years that his gallery has been open, to validate such claims that we currently have phenomenally good abstract artists living and working in Kansas City. (Nine out of 12 artists in the show live in Kansas City, and the same number have also had solo shows at the gallery.)

Nease exhibited several of these artists long before they achieved their current level of local notoriety — having shown James Brinsfield, Shaun Cassidy, and Marcie Miller Gross at least three years ago, and James Woodfill, and Judith Sanazaro two years ago. He continues to find many talented abstract artists in the region. Several of Kansas City's heavy hitters such as Warren Rosser, Lester Goldman, and James Brinsfield sought out Nease's gallery during highly successful reinventions of their work. These recent alignments with the gallery's focus have resulted in several consecutive high profile solo and group shows at the space, tightening its overall look within the last two years.

A quick look at the art on Joseph Nease's website was enough to convince San Francisco artist Jessica Snow to make a series of five of her abstract meanderings on paper for the gallery's current exhibition. *Major Tom's Journal* is made up of five individual works, each measuring approximately 12"x14". Concentric circles in brightly colored paint are paired with a random patterning of thin ink and pencil tracings on paper, with each intimate drawing naked of framing and delicately pinned to the wall. These works manage to hold their own over the hyper-drive din of colors that dominate most of the show, and actually become a high point of fresh talent in a show of colossal works from other familiar faces.

New York artist John Torreano's *Eye Bomb* winks at viewers entering the exhibition, with a multicolor sparkle of acrylic gems set into a yellow and red wooden sphere. Sitting isolated on its pedestal, it is a sly teaser for the real pay-off to come. Around the corner in the second gallery space, one eye is drawn to a colorful constellation, from floor to the ceiling, of similar yet smaller, gem-laden wooden balls, mounted in various states of emergence from the gallery's wall. The effect virtually equals the power of the artist's larger, more singular totemic pieces, previously shown in 1999 at Johnson County Community College.

Kansas City artist James Woodfill pulls a sleight-of-hand with his wall-mounted installation of coiled and knotted black, yellow, orange, and blue *extension cords*, coaxing them into forms that appear suggestively organic in their sum, overcoming their purely industrial parts. The work is true Woodfill, though unplugged, and the pieces succeed by virtue of the conduit rather than the current. The works remind us that Woodfill really can make art out of anything.

Nate Fors picks up where Woodfill left off, plugging in his two latest pieces, *Flirt*, and *Hells Angels in a Pink Van*, both mixed media works incorporating illumination via bundles of Christmas lights. *Hells Angels* is Fors at his most comfortable, utilizing a recent signature motif of corrugated fiberglass panel, covered in patterned fabric. *Flirt* however, delivers a more surprising impact, due to its small scale, less posturing and unassuming location, hugging the baseboard near an outlet. Each of its elements are coiled into one tightly bundled composition, making for a piece that is all holiday lights and cat toy fuzz, ready to spring forth from the center of a shiny metallic vinyl record. The piece has a wonderfully awkward energy of a truly confused, improvisational moment, different from his other more calculated entry.

Lester Goldman shows us that his pre-



Lester Goldman, *Fallin Grace*

vious solo show at Nease was only a hint of bigger and better things to come with *Fallin Grace*, a huge painting on canvas measuring 78"x96"x9" and complete with its own yellow vinyl reclining bench. Even as it leans casually against the wall, propped on a cushy yellow day-glo bed, this piece visually shakes the room. With acid lime gestures and hot pink squiggles, suggesting a fallen though still writhing mammoth form, the piece feels on the verge of conducting electricity. The overstuffed nature of the upholstered bench also gives assurance of a soft landing.

Judith Sanazaro's two panel painting, *Spaced Invaders*, demonstrates restraint as she allows much of the two separately spaced canvases to remain free of her thick signature impasto strokes. Pairing one blue panel with one pink, Sanazaro gives us a virtual line drawing in glitter-flaked oil paint of radiating duel explosions — a bold and graphic work that feels celebratory in its openness of shape and form.

Also utilizing a minimal line-drawn quality, though to a much different end, is English sculptor Shaun Cassidy, with his bright pink lasso-form, *Over the Edge*. Playing off the floor, adjacent wall, and the space in-between, Cassidy's steel sculpture is the simplest of forms — a line in space — that climbs the wall then loops back down upon itself to drop through a horizontally hovering hoop, finally ending at the floor with an abrupt t-bar punctuation. As in many of his latest works, issues of motion, gravity, and weightlessness abound.

Eric Sall's *Countdown to Tomorrow* suggests that this is a young painter who is getting better with each painting, exponentially. This work involves large zones of flat and expansive color, both neutral and specific, convergent with a painterly, kitchen-sink style mush of every other color in the book. Sall's monumentally scaled paintings, enjoyed here singu-

larly, also possess an ability to refresh with each subsequent viewing, and flirt with a narrative while remaining completely abstract.

James Brinsfield also weighs in with one piece, *Space Race*, a two-dimensional work on canvas comprised of geometrically striped layers of colored vinyl with three individual marker-drawn cartoon images floating between the transparent layers. Brinsfield's three goofy, though intimate drawings manage to surprise and confound the whole composition (one is of a race car, and two are spaceships, one piloted by Brinsfield, the other piloted by his wife, while both share what looks to be the same dog co-pilot). With the idiosyncratic collaging of such disparate methods into one piece, the results are a humorously clever crux, residing in the rift of interplay between notions of identity and the absolute.

Two pale abstract oil compositions on linen are recent descendants of Karen Owsley's more thickly clotted abstract paintings, and represent a fresh new direction for her work. *Situation of the Gravity* (spiral) offers a soft white field where small beige trapezoidal forms flutter into a spiral formation, while her *Situation of the Gravity* (ellipse) offers the same format in two tones of pale blue and punches of bright orange-red. Both pieces delight upon extended viewing, as optical effects cause spatial shifts to occur in both deep and shallow space. The effect is coupled with an extremely sensitive tracing of paint applications, piquing interest in the tactical nature of their surfaces and fooling the eye into believing in the presence other materials used to create them.

Rachel Hayes is another young artist to watch very closely (be looking for a solo show at Nease sometime in the near future). With her six new mixed media pieces (only three of which are in the

show), it is easy to see why. These largely abstract torpedo-shaped forms are made up of swatches of fabric, stitched together, to compose bands of color, pattern, transparency, and texture, with each one stuffed and mounted on a wooden support. The distinct personalities of each piece are undeniable, and they appear as members of a sort of family while not giving away their abstract origins. The only unfortunate aspect of the installation, however, is that there was not enough room to have them viewed together. One piece stands alone in the gallery office, as if isolated in some form of punishment, while the other two pieces had to be left lying against a wall in the back room, appearing casket-like in the darkness.

The final artist in the exhibition, Marcie Miller Gross, provides two stacked fabric pieces for the show, which embody such subtle yet profound simplicity that they function as visual anchors for much of the whole exhibition. *Enfold* is a human scale stack of used flannel hospital blankets, a form that brings loads of associations and connotations.

Each blanket varies slightly in hue, from stark white to soft pale blue or with a hint of green, and the folds themselves represent a perfectionist's alignment. Owsley Nease's nearby paintings could not have provided for a more serendipitously perfect occasion for placement. Miller Gross's second piece, *Enfold* is a stack of funky old beach towels that also appears heaped with connotations and memories. Intelligently placed on a pedestal in the center of the space, this piece becomes a colorful beacon, gathering signals from other works in the room and charging them with added conceptual dimension in effortless fashion.

Marcus Cain has a BFA from the Kansas City Art Institute, 1998 Painting/Printmaking. He is assistant director of Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art, and art committee co-chair for Hope Care Center's annual "Hope at the Crossroads" art events.



Marcie Miller Gross, *Enfold*

Eating a Mango

The American Woman says,  
Do it in the bath.  
The English ex-pat says,  
You can't eat a mango  
and do anything else.  
The mango's a woman:  
Give yourself to her  
as she gives herself to you.  
The Frenchman says,  
Peeling a mango's like  
removing a brassiere.  
If there's an art to it

you've not mastered it.  
If there's a natural gift  
you've not got it.  
You make a baby's worth  
of mess eating one small fruit,  
pulp and juice all over  
your face, hands, desk, tee shirt,  
and yet eating it was like sex  
so sweet you don't mind the mess!  
You'll clean up when your body's full  
glowing  
with the sweetest fruit.

—Brian Daldorph