



Keep on Living

Hill and Rawe juxtapose religion and product at Semantics

MATT MORRIS // JAN 9, 2008

Despite the lag in Brighton's art scene in recent months, its own Semantics continues to deliver fresh exhibitions that cultivate a sense of community for Cincinnati's creative class.

This month the gallery hosts a two-person exhibition called *Keep on Living*, featuring brand new work by Nick Hill and Zach Rawe. Hill's drossy minimal objects and Rawe's crude references to advertising simultaneously clarify and obscure explorations into personal and societal worship.

Throughout the space, Hill unfurls a woozy set of lightly abstracted objects, mostly realized in various hues of craft-store felt. All of these works (as well as Rawe's) have been made in the past couple of weeks, installed and been left hoping for the best.

In this case, "the best" is characterized by some spiritual bestowal where the reductive means of the works themselves give way to what Hill hopes will be "a space that will take viewers through a lot of ups and downs, where they can come in, think, meditate or whatever they need done."

Hill's pieces and their delicate arrangement are what might happen if the Stations of the Cross were ever conceived in Robert Morris-ian post-minimalism or if Richard Tuttle started teaching art-based Sunday school classes. It's not preposterous to bring the Bible into this: Many of the abstract, felt-cut shapes could be parlayed into symbols from New Testament legend (crimson robes, tongues of holy ghost flame).

Further, the gaping manger in the center of the gallery, like the last prop to be taken away from a Christmas pageant, isn't difficult to decode. Hill has either replaced or

transformed the swaddled infant's traditional place into a nest of chunky pompoms, set onto swaths of baby blue felt.

This piece, entitled "The Great Attractor," might be the scene of some crib robbery — if only one that bespeaks of a present day conceptual dilemma of faith and the struggle of realizing one's own spiritual identity.

More of Hill's soulful intonations are hung just beyond the crest of this installation. "Witches and Language Meanies" is a painting on paper set behind glass in a sleek frame and portrays a sloppy composition of circles formed from layers of silver and black acrylic paint. The image fluctuates coyly between cartoony representation and a merry contribution to the history of geometric abstraction.

A round face can be readily read from the forms. Drenched in concern, its small, round mouth is dropped open at a loss for words. This confessional character lies on the other side of a glass partition, as if being visited in prison.

Just next to it is a squarish painting on stretched denim. Its scrubby white and silver field coarsely quotes the kind of transcendence sought after by mid-20th century abstract expressionists. This is only confirmed by the painting's title, "Spiritual Cincinnati," and adds to a scene of objects that collectively narrate one post-minimalist pilgrim's progress.

But before visitors can contemplate this band of Hill's objects, one of Rawe's installations greet them in their approach. Within the bay window on the gallery's front, he's duct-taped a flurry of white cardboard discs around the gallery's signage.

While acting as motifs of falling snow, the introduction of torn rectangles of silvery tape extending beyond the small discs re-cast the display as an act of abstract poetry. In this piece and throughout the show, both artists reference painting's historical trek through the past century.

In the case of Rawe's "Semantics Winter Display," directional dashes in tape and the allover pattern of white dots could easily reminisce over witty responses to abstract painting by Warhol or by modernist maven Mary Heilmann. Its store display quality begins Rawe's meandering considerations on commodity and the spoils of middle-class America that can be traced through much of his work within the gallery.

Specifically, these are a series of similarly crude shrines made from cardboard, wood and paint upon which are presented store-bought snacks like Choxie chocolates and campy cans of flavored coffee. The human handling and the throwaway nature of the materials employed both elevate and call into question the products that are featured at the center of most of his pieces.

On this possible contradiction, Rawe explains, "I like the idea of things being pathetic. I want to raise an object but not use tools that would be less attainable to my audience."

Rawe's relish of snack bars and clearance aisles is considerate without conjuring a forthright celebration of affordability and pleasure.

Aside from opening receptions, it's never easy for viewers to catch shows in Cincinnati's evolving network of alternative galleries (i.e., Publico in Over-the-Rhine, whose closing is documented in this week's [cover story](#)). This is regrettable, because shows like *Keep on Living* offer sensitive, fresh art that needs to be seen.

KEEP ON LIVING runs through Jan. 25 at Semantics, 1107 Harrison Ave., Brighton. Gallery visits are by appointment only and can be scheduled via 859-757-8356.

<https://www.citybeat.com/arts-culture/visual-arts/article/13025023/art-review-keep-on-living>