

Cincinnati CityBeat



Thunder-Sky Inc. Exhibits

Different means, same end for two new shows

MATT MORRIS // NOV 23, 2010

For those viewers willing to go along for the ride, the two intermixed exhibitions now at Thunder-Sky Inc. are post-psychedelic trips into alternative ways of processing thought. The innovative Northside gallery has shows featuring artists interested in outsider or folk art.

On the one side is Bruce Burris' *Welcome to the Lonely Mountain Community Center*, and on the other is Aaron Oliver Wood's *Rainy Day*. Both artists embed their inquiries and interests in swirling patterns and acidic color schemes, but from there on out they diverge as each goes deeper into their own fantasy realms.

Burris currently lives and works in Lexington, after studying at Nason College in Maine and the San Francisco Art Institute. He has been exhibiting across the country and has been honored with a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Fellowship and an NEA Fellowship.

Burris' works make mention of the titular community center, which is in fact a fictitious construction through which the artist processes his aesthetic concerns as well as his real-life political and social protests. It is a meta-narrative, outfitted with characters, churches and organized protests against big corporation opponents. In our present political climate (think of Glenn Beck's "Restoring Honor" rally in D.C. at the beginning of the fall and the Jon Stewart-led "Rally to Restore Sanity" several months later), what the artist is showing looks as much like the real world we are living in as the hippie-era protests that seem to have inspired him.

On the gallery's back wall is "Bulletin Board," a large, cluttered display topped with the header "Welcome to Lonely Mountain Community Center ~ John 1:17." Artist-created flyers, announcements and sign-up sheets are pinned, overlapping all over the bulletin board (pictured above). When setting about to invent a world, it is striking that Burris did not offer a utopian vision: Notices from drug-support groups suggest a rampant meth problem in the Lonely Mountain community, alongside house foreclosures, babysitters for working moms and efforts to resist mountaintop removal in the area.

There are full-scale protest signs that accompany the community board, all of which are rainbows of colored stripes and spots and express heated outcries for the preservation of mountain ranges. One reads, "Time to fuckin' stop our bleeding mountaintop."

One gallery wall is scattered with a number of paintings on panel that re-create some of the posters and flyers on the bulletin board across the room. Even though we ideologically separate paintings from posters, Burris implies that in our overly developed culture, rife with semiotics, the two are fundamentally the same thing now. That is, paintings are cultural signifiers that communicate the political, economic and personal conditions that surrounded their making. His poster painting that begins "Conflict Management Tools" — scripted in varying doodled fonts — is straightforward and suggests that art is just such a tool to aid in conflict resolution.

Wood, originally from Florida, is based in Cincinnati. He holds a bachelor's degree in graphic design from Northern Kentucky University and has worked extensively in the area as an illustrator, an exhibiting artist and even the host of a Psychedelic music show for community radio station WAIF (88.3 FM).

His drawings, prints, posters and papier-maché objects evoke Freak Folk, Indie Rock sensibilities through sinuous, nebulous patterns that pile onto themselves to set the scene. One long wall is hung with nine oversized works on paper that, read together, tell a sad love story. Two abstract portraits in colored pencil and washes of paint — “Aquarian 1” and “Aquarian 2” — are separated by six prints collectively titled “Tear Drops.”

One assumes that the thin-lipped, shorthaired character is a handsome young man; his counterpart has the wavy locks popular among female hipsters nowadays. The male is an entrancing pile of violets, tawny browns and red-pinks. His female counterpart is painted in noticeably somber hues, wreathed in a smoky black wash, and her eyes are silver-leafed into a vacant expression.

They might be Adam and Eve, except they aren't banished from a garden. Rather, they seem to be banished from one another. The “Tear Drops” prints depict puddles, roughly hewn concentric circles that could be a minefield of black holes separating the two characters. Pedestals placed almost in front of the portraits display “Eyeball Space Helmet” and “Helmet,” both battered, playful headgears that suggest armament and escape.

Wood's tender “Butterfly Chart” is a large sheet filled with ornamental renderings of butterflies that have been color-coded in blue, green and orange, as well as several in the reds and pinks of meat and skin. Beneath one winged creature, two tribal-looking figures huddle around a campfire, suggesting that the butterfly has been conjured from smoke, magic and memory. Just the invocation of collecting the remains of such a beautiful insect suggests loss. This is a theme that refers back to Burris' work, with its concerns about coal miners ravaging the environment, and thus connects the two artists.

Both of them bring lots of energy, imagery and creativity into their engagements with conflicts. In Burris' case, they are social comment; in Wood's, they are detached, internalized imagery seemingly culled from a fantasy of escaping heartbreak by pulling on a helmet and launching into space.

WELCOME TO THE LONELY MOUNTAIN COMMUNITY CENTER and RAINY DAY are on display at Thunder-Sky Inc. in Northside through Dec. 31.

<https://www.citybeat.com/arts-culture/visual-arts/article/13013010/thundersky-inc-exhibits-review>