

ART REVIEW: ANYTHING GOES WHEN IT COMES TO CONTEMPORARY ART AT MCA DENVER

BY MICHAEL PAGLIA - WEDNESDAY, JUNE 10, 2015



"Jake (1)," by Monique Crine, oil on canvas.

Almost anything goes in contemporary art right now, which explains the wide range of expressions included in the three shows at MCA Denver.

It makes sense to begin with Critical Focus: Monique Crine, which is installed on the lower level. The exhibit was organized by MCA curator Nora Burnett Abrams as part of the museum's "Critical Focus" series, which is devoted to emerging artists. Crine, who lives in Colorado, has established a reputation over the past few years for her meticulously crafted and beautifully composed hyperrealist paintings. The selections at MCA, many of them monumental in size, were made specifically for this show; they're portraits of retired professional football players from Crine's "Eden Prairie" series.

At first the pieces look like photo enlargements, but on closer examination, it becomes obvious that they are paintings, ones in which Crine has employed thinned-out, finely blended oil pigments. For these works, she photographed the subjects and then used the photos as preliminary studies. One of Crine's greatest

strengths is the remarkable level of detail she conveys and the utterly smooth painted surfaces she achieves.



"Jake (III)," by Monique Crine, oil on canvas.

Though the men in these larger-than-life-sized portraits are retired, they are still young and, to all appearances, physically robust. Crine depicts them at rest or just standing; because of injuries, they can no longer play the game. For Abrams, this is a compelling conceptual undercurrent that adds to the appeal of the easy-to-appreciate works.

In her series, Crine is contrasting the apparent athletic abilities of her models with the fact that all of them have been laid up. The contradiction is highlighted in the way that she gives the fallen athletes an almost cinematic glamour; the handsome men have been dramatically lit so that they look like movie stars. It's sort of a fish-out-of water story: football players who can't play football. The key appeal here isn't the implicit narrative, however, but rather how beautifully crafted and exquisitely composed the paintings are.

All of the Crines are impressive, though the largest ones are the most eye-popping. I loved "Jake (III)," which depicts a big, light-haired guy in water up to his massive chest. He's looking directly at the viewer, but he's standing at an angle and seems to be lit by a single ray of sunlight aimed at him. Also notable is Crine's handling of the water, which is lyrically yet convincingly done.



"Self," by Kim Dorland, oil and acrylic over wood panel

As I said earlier, it's an anything-goes kind of art world now, and the other solo, Kim Dorland: *Everyday Monsters*, on the first floor at MCA, presents us with paintings that are the polar opposite of Crine's, even if Dorland is also working in the realm of figuration. Whereas Crine labors to capture every detail, Dorland hides the details in thick coats of heavily worked paint. It wouldn't be correct to call them painterly; they're beyond that.

This show was put together by MCA director Adam Lerner, who tapped the collection of Wayne Yakes to do it. Yakes has collected Dorland in depth, and the show includes three dozen pieces. Broadly speaking, they are expressionistically painted, and although many of Dorland's technical devices — especially the piling up of the pigment in layers — have an abstract quality, there's a recognizable subject underneath them: Many are based on traditional types of fine-art compositions, like the portrait or landscape forms.

For the painting "Self," Dorland created a self-portrait in which his face is covered not by his features, but by a series of thick daubs and heavy smears of paint with deep furrows. The face, and the painting itself, are dominated by various shades of a garish green. "Negative" depicts a woman at the bathroom sink. In this case, the paint was applied more sparingly, with the woman, done in yellow, standing out against the black-on-black rendering of the sink. Many of the Dorlands concern lowbrow topics like zombies and Sasquatch. The artist also embraces lowbrow palettes with lots of Day-Glo colors. These works are simultaneously compelling and hideous.



"Quick, like a Bunny," by Rebecca Vaughan.

Abrams teamed up with Lerner to jointly curate *Thief Among Thieves*, a group show on the second floor. Like the Dorland display, this one is also compelling and hideous. The title refers to the fact that artists typically take inspiration from other artists, and in that sense, they are all thieves. To select the twenty-plus artists for the show, Abrams and Lerner sampled a broad array of contemporary approaches. They are careful to point out, however, that the show isn't meant to cover everything that's going on in art right now. There are artists from across the country represented, with pieces loaned by private collectors, but Abrams and Lerner have, laudably, also included a strong contingent of mostly younger Denver artists, nearly all of whom have past or present associations with RedLine and/or Tank Studios.

The two organizers didn't overtly lay out any particular stylistic analysis for *Thief*, but because a quartet of spaces were used for the exhibit, they had to divide it up into four parts. The first, in the snug Caulkins and Kister Gallery, includes several intimate, unrelated works, including a text-based multi-panel piece by Claire Fontaine; a suite of glittery cartoonish drawings by Raqib Shaw; and, just outside of the space, two small sculptures by Rebecca Vaughan that pair architectural fretwork with model train tracks. (See what I mean about free association in this show?)



"Scalar Fields," by Dmitri Obergfell.

Things get a little tighter in the Crescenti Gallery, which Abrams has nicknamed the “minimalist” room — though strictly speaking, the works are not related to minimalism. In this section are examples by several of the most-talked-about artists in town, among them Derrick Velasquez, who is represented by one of his wood-and-vinyl pieces, and Dmitri Obergfell, who’s included his remarkable metal panel that changes color as the viewer walks by it.

Also striking is the mostly black linear abstract by Zach Reini done in skateboard grip tape. Other standouts include a bare steel panel from Sam Falls that changes in appearance through the effects of the air, and Matthew Brandt’s “Night Sky,” done in, of all things, powdered cocaine on black velvet. All of these pieces are derived from classic abstraction, as is the very neo-ab-ex “Mouth Full of Smoke,” by Angel Otero. The works in this section — the best passage in the show — push forward a number of modernist modes that are still apparently relevant.

The next phase is in the Congdon Gallery, which could be designated as the “funk room” for this show; it’s where Abrams and Lerner have assembled some of the most emphatic works, as well as a number of works by local artists. There are the somewhat disturbing mattress-based pieces by Amber Cobb, along with a pair of beautifully complex drawings by Theresa Anderson, whose clear strength is in drafting and painting. Laura Shill’s cyanotypes, based on cut-up found images taken from romance-novel covers, are likewise very nice and very sophisticated.



"Palas por Pistolas, by Pedro Reyes.

The last section, in the Logan Promenade, includes just a single work: "Palas por Pistolas," by Pedro Reyes, a lineup of nineteen shovels made from melted-down weapons. It's a conceptual take on turning swords into plowshares.

Since the MCA was founded as a venue to promote local art, it's good to see the museum partially fulfilling this mandate at present, both with the Crine show and with the many locals in Thief Among Thieves.

Monique Crine, Kim Dorland and Thief Among Thieves

Through June 28 at MCA Denver, 1485 Delgany Street, 303-298-7554,
mcadenver.org.