

Masks, rebuses, spouts and skyscrapers

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PITTSFIELD -- Gallery walking through Cultural Pittsfield encounters a number of new exhibits, more than one review can cover. I will look at two now and return to the others in a couple of weeks.

Ceramics may not be your cup of tea, but the Ferrin Gallery's "Teapots: Interpretations" has brewed up something that should interest everyone. A playful mix of artwork and vessels, the exhibit explores the visual, conceptual and utilitarian definition of teapots.

Teapots

Janet Rickus's painting "Teapot Tangle" is a showstopper. One of America's premier still-life artists, her piece sensitively balances two vessels dissimilar in size, shape and color. This simple composition weds the visual economy of Modernism with Old World craftsmanship. As Indiana Jones would say, "It belongs in a museum."

The stars of the show are the ceramic teapots, which divide into two groups: functional and sculptural. It's the latter that makes for a fascinating visit. These potters treat their vessels as sculpture, ingeniously concealing the original utilitarian function. While all these objects retain a spout, lid and some sort of handle, they are artworks, not meant for use.

Kathryn McBride's "Travel-Yixing" depicts a stack of Barbie-sized valises. The title refers to a region of China, where potters traditionally made vessels imitating objects. McBride's skills of mimicry are engrossing, detailing stitching, leather texture, tiny grips, and so on. It's easy to see why collectors prize such pieces.

These ceramists are remarkable for their imitation of surface qualities. Rollie Younger's "Canned Tea" replicates a riveted, cast iron teakettle. In "Boston Tea Party," Steve Hansen seemingly uses iron brackets to clasp on an old Mass. license plate. With muted colors and coarse texture, Matthew Wilt fashions a metallic abstraction of circles and cylinders in "Server I."

Victor Spinski's "Carving a Teapot Out of a Rock" presents a complete still-life narrative. A smooth, white teapot emerges from a rugged stone matrix. Lying among rock fragments are a mallet and two iron chisels. Through his mastery of glazing and color, Spinski casts a spell of illusion over his ceramic medium.

Jim Budde's chimerical "All Aboard" resembles a walking, breathing totem pole as a tortoise carries an assortment of creatures on its back. Karen Portaleo's "The Fat Maries" depicts a corpulent, seated woman, nestling a child and smoking a cigarette. With pieces like these, you'll need to remind yourself that they are teapots -- assimilating spouts, lids, and handles -- and not sculpture.

Richard Notkin, who defines himself as a sculptor, frequently steepes political commentary in his vessels. From his Yixing Series, "Heart Teapot" presents an anatomical heart with arteries serving as spout, lid, and handle -- all armor-plated. Notkin sees the human heart as the source of wars. Clad for conflict and fettered in chains, the vessel is forever entangled in its destiny.

Lichtenstein Center

Fanning the embers of culture, the Lichtenstein Center hosts its second Annual Pittsfield Contemporary Art Show. Opened to artists working or living in the city, a three-person jury oversaw the selection process. As to be expected from a noncommercial gallery, the quality of artwork in this eclectic show varies.

Mike Carty's sassy painting, "True Love," resembles a rebus in the language of street art. Paul Graubard interestingly juxtaposes works depicting masks and portraits. The exhibit includes many photos, and Eric Korenman wins the lion's share. His images of local buildings are studies in geometric abstraction.

Michael McKay, whose paintings I reviewed last year in a one-man show at Zeitgeist, also makes an appearance. His forceful, monolithic images of the urban fabric convey the harsh, unforgiving backdrop of that stage. Resembling serigraphs, these pieces have a nice interplay between perspective and planarity. "Broadway and 9th," albeit unframed, is particularly successful.

Nonrepresentational works include Eduardo Villanes's exotic abstractions in black, heavily-textured oil paint. Their subtle designs swirl and swell hypnotically. Jay Tobin's geometric paintings attract through their simplicity and softness. Unburdened by excessive art criticism, these pleasant pieces hark back to a time when abstraction was more visual than intellectual.

That takes us halfway through the list. What can I say? When it rains in Pittsfield, it pours.