Tribune-Review
Entertainment

Three new exhibits open eyes at Regina Gouger Miller Gallery

By Kurt Shaw
TRIBUNE-REVIEW ART CRITIC
Sunday, October 5, 2003

If you're not familiar with the campus of Carnegie Mellon University, finding the Regina Gouger Miller Gallery, which is located in the relatively nondescript Purnell Center for the Arts, usually requires some asking around. But currently, finding the gallery should be easy. Just look for the shack located on "the cut," CMU's central lawn.

The shack, which was given the title "Juakali Field Station" by the artist responsible for it -- Rudy Shepherd -- is a solid-looking structure that is built on posts and has steps leading up to it. Covered in blue canvas that serves as a roof, it holds little more than some used patio furniture.

"Juakali" is an African Kiswahili term for "fierce sun" and refers to the act of pulling together a business or way of life from what you have on hand. In his own way, that's what Shepherd, an African-American artist from New York City, did when he came to town in August. He pulled together local resources, such as enlisting the help of 17 kids involved with a summer program at Friendship Academy.

Shepherd asked each of the kids to come up with a design for a shack or tree house-like structure, from which they all chose one to build. After a little more than a week of full-time work building the shack out of new and salvaged items donated by Construction Junction, Shepherd and the staff of the Regina Gouger Miller Gallery completed the project just in time for the opening of Shepherd's show, "Affirmative Actions," at the gallery in early September.

Shepherd asked each of the kids to come up with a design for a shack or tree house-like structure, from which they all chose one to build. After a little more than a week of full-time work building the shack out of new and salvaged items donated by Construction Junction, Shepherd and the staff of the Regina Gouger Miller Gallery completed the project just in time for the opening of Shepherd's show, "Affirmative Actions," at the gallery in early September.

Since then, Regina Gouger Miller Gallery director Jenny Strayer says about the shack, "I see people in here all the time -- reading, studying, eating their lunch, waving to their friends, talking about it."

Although she admits that it's not the most beautiful structure, Strayer says the piece is more about process. "Its aesthetics didn't drive it," Strayer says. "It was the collaboration between Rudy and the kids and their ideas that brought it to fruition."

Inside the gallery, the kids' original designs are pinned to a wall on the second floor. Not far from them hangs a large photograph of a distinctive suburban home. That photo is of Shepherd's father's house in a middle-class suburb where Shepherd grew up, and it's a far cry from an African hut.

However, in many ways this contradiction of extremes is what Shepherd's work is about, and it plays out on many levels. For example, in "Scopophilia," six life-size photographs of Shepherd in various modes of dress hang next to each other on a wall opposite the kids' drawings. Each represents a certain stereotype -- the street person, the deadhead, the artist, the young professional, the hip-hop persona and the everyman. Here, Shepherd questions the viewer's response to stereotype, awakening all preconceived notions and turning them back on the viewer.

The same is done in other works. In one, an American flag made entirely of black nylon, Shepherd questions the American perception of "blackness" in terms of cultural identity and the color itself. And in another, three videos play side by side -- one of Shepherd singing a Beach Boys song, one of his infant son suckling his mother's breast and one showing footage of fleeing black men from the TV show "Cops."

All of this creates an unsettling feeling, as if Shepherd is forcing his audience to struggle with the same identity issues that he has. And that, in turn, is the point.

As entirely interactive as Shepherd's work is, upstairs on the third floor, another exhibition, "The Paper Sculpture Show," is even more so.

For this traveling exhibition, which opened simultaneously at New York's SculptureCenter, 29 artists were asked to create designs for paper sculptures that visitors could create themselves.

Accompanied by instructions for assembly, the projects range from the simple, such as Charles Goldman's, in which visitors are asked to poke holes in a sheet of dark blue paper, to the complex, like Janine Antoni's, in which visitors are challenged to re-create a crumpled piece of paper the artist initially made herself.

"The exhibition invites people to complete these projects, but whether they choose to follow the directions or not is entirely up to them," Strayer says. "That's part of the whole notion of this exhibition -- a collaboration of sorts between the artists who put together the plans and the people who complete them in their own way."

On the gallery's first floor, another exhibition, "Memorial Project Vietnam," consists of two films by Vietnamese artist Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba.

Hatsushiba's work deals with political and social reform in wake of the Vietnam War. And, for anyone who knows anything about the immigration of Southeast Asians to America, the symbolisms contained in these two films are not lost.

Filmed entirely underwater, one film features a group of men pushing pedicabs on an ocean floor; in the other, they pull a Tet dragon and a cage of lottery balls. Their struggles to maneuver through water, oftentimes stopping to rise for air, symbolize the struggles of a people. Along with heart-pounding soundtracks that accompany each, which reach crescendo in time with the visuals, these films are so captivating they seem almost as interactive as the other two exhibitions on display.

Kurt Shaw can be reached at kshaw@tribweb.com.

Exterior view of "Juakali Field Station," part of Rudy Shepherd's "Affirmative Actions" exhibit at Regina Gouger Miller Gallery.
Regina Gouger Miller Gallery

In 'Scopophilia,' six life-size photographs of Rudy Shepherd in various modes of dress hang next to each other on a wall opposite the kids' drawings. Each represents a certain stereotype - the street person, the deadhead, the artist, the young professional, the hip-hop persona and the everyman.
Regina Gouger Miller Gallery

°°

Exterior view of "Juakali Field Station," part of Rudy Shepherd's "Affirmative Actions" exhibit at Regina Gouger Miller Gallery.
Regina Gouger Miller Gallery