Courting Favor

by Michael J. Krainak

Courting Favor Bemis offers something old, new, borrowed and blue with annual auction exhibit

If you are a patron of the arts you have gotten the memo, not to mention the email, Twitter and formal invitation: “Come join us at the 12th annual Bemis Center Art Auction and Exhibition. The favor of a reply is appreciated.”

“Reply,” as in the pleasure of your company and participation in what for more than a decade has been the single most anticipated and enjoyable arts event in this region. The auction, which has grown to a three-night fundraising social affair, began Wednesday with a special cocktail preview. Patrons saw the work of 260+ area, national and international artists; 400+ pieces that ranged in value before auction from $60 to $60,000.

To accommodate the number of offerings, the Bemis offers the first auction Thursday, Nov. 4, in the Underground only, 7-9 p.m., featuring 120+ works with a smaller price point and its own spin on refreshments and entertainment.

The gala climaxes Saturday with its traditional silent auction, 5:30-10 p.m., followed by a live auction in Bemis’ newly renovated first floor galleries. The auction is the center’s biggest money-raising event budgeted to support exhibitions, public projects and international artist residency.

Mark Masouka, director of the Bemis Center, set this year’s fundraising goal at an ambitious $500,000, an anticipated $100,000 increase over last year’s objective. Based on the auction’s absentee bidding and “buy-it-now” feature, more than 30 pieces were sold for more than $30,000 by last weekend. Masouka attributes this early success to a four-week exhibition open since Oct. 8.

Six years ago, he and former assistant director Jeremy Stern gave the auction a “dual role” by creating a multi-week exhibition prior to the fundraiser. “They [artists and public] stopped seeing it as just a fundraiser,” he said, “and the curators took a bigger role. Together the show became less about what would sell and more on significant, representative art. A better show will result in a better fundraiser.”

Several improvements have been made in the show and auction to benefit potential collectors, artists and the center. One is the installation and hanging of the art.

“In the past, it was all about managing and installing the huge amount of work on the first floor,” Masouka said. “Now it’s more curatorial. We wanted to create a better viewing space, to keep it fresh.”

He, Bemis curator Hesse McGraw and Underground manager Brigitte McQueen avoided the Salon style used in the past, where work covered walls virtually top to bottom, hanging the art with a consistent eye-level line.

The result is the most pleasing auction exhibition to date, or what McGraw accurately calls, “a survey of significant contemporary art.” Best of all, the installation will allow for a more enjoyable and ecumenical experience come auction night.
"The show provides a more level playing field for the work," Masuoka says. "Each piece breathes, your eye doesn’t wander, allowing you to make more informed choices."

To further accommodate "a less stressful experience" Saturday night, Bemis is providing a buffet in a designated social area and a "smoother, more dramatic transition of closing down each area of the silent auction, because it’s been a bit too abrupt in the past," Masuoka added.

Each evening will enjoy its own vibe as Bemis continues to reach into the community and court the favor of artists and their shared audience. Though Bemis is the ultimate benefactor, everyone benefits in this courtship. The unknown each year is the audience. Judging by the show, the real gem in this annual exchange of vows, money and art, is that the venue and participating artists have done their part in offering something old, something new, something borrowed and a few things blue.

"Old" because Bemis continues to count on such established artists as Betty Woodman, Deborah Masuoka, Therman Statom, Keith Jacobshagen and Christina Nordman, to name but a few, who have contributed significant work. More emerging artists are familiar faces here as well, several whose edgier, alternative work is just shy of the mainstream, including Matt Lowe, Jamie Burmeister, Stephen Azevedo, Scott Blake, Jody Boyer and Russ Nordman.

But viewers always appreciate "new" entrants to the auction and McQueen can take much of the credit here as several appear in the Underground by her invitation: Doug Boehm, Dan Crane, Mary Balda, Jennifer Balkan, Andrew Johnson, Hugo Zamorano and Kjell Peterson among others.

McQueen says the Underground gives collectors "more options to purchase at all levels. It also offers emerging artists the chance to participate for the common goal while being shown alongside their influences and mentors."

"Something borrowed" applies to the work on consignment. And unless you take "blue" literally, as in the extraordinary palette of Kristin Pluhacek’s painting, "Laps II," there are only a few nudes in the show including Rebecca Herskovitz’s sultry mixed media, "And So I Hurt You, Again and Again," Tana Quincy’s subtle drawing "Founded," Kristae Peterson’s figure study in oil “Winding Down,” and the provocative cut paper of Wanda Ewing, “POV.”

Overall, McQueen and McGraw focused on three goals: creating a sustainable relationship between the Bemis, artists and the community; reinventing the exhibition itself; and reflecting both a local and global commitment to contemporary art in the venue. An added benefit, McGraw says, is that it gives the viewer a sense of an arc in the career of each artist who participates annually.

Perhaps this show’s strongest suit is the careful groupings many works enjoy for a point of viewer comparison based on more than media or genre.

"The works also have a conversation in close proximity while still maintaining continuity," McGraw said. "It’s based upon architectural principles of complexity and contradiction, density and intensity. The intention is to give viewers a sense of surprise looming around each corner in the show while still enabling decision making."

At times, groupings are deliberate, as in gender issues dealt with in Ewing’s “Would,” Heidi Bartlett’s “Revanche” and Christina Renfer Vogel’s oil “Event” in Gallery 1 or the idiosyncratic portraits of Mark Gilbert, Claudia Alvarez and Paolo Dolzan in Gallery 3. At times, the dialogue is across the gallery as with two singular landscapes, Larry Ferguson’s romantic and idealistic photo, “Bill Coffee’s Hat Creek Ranch” and Kent Bellows’ starkly realistic litho print, “River Bank.”

Not all the “connections” are premeditated such as the curious rabbit motif in Amy Morin’s flopsy-mopsy fabric sculpture, “The Rose Rabbit of Inlé,” Fulvio de Pellegrin’s startling photo “I Mandanti,” previously mentioned. Masuoka’s magisterial earthenware “Rabbit Head” or John Westmark’s metaphoric mixed media, "POV." Not a "connection" but an altogether distinct piece is Susan Knight’s ephemeral cut paper “Rosette Submerged,” whose organic design is most appealing.

There are many such groupings, but ultimately what catches the eye and ends up at home, work or play are those pieces viewers decide they can live with. Based on that presumption and criteria that include good value for the collector at any price, as well as work that is edgy, original and unified, this critic offers some favorite standout.

For beginning collectors or those on a budget, consider these pieces (in no particular order) under a “buy it now” price of under $1,000 though bidding will start lower:

- Nicholas Bohac’s satirical, apocalyptic mixed media, “Futurescapes.” Anja Sijben’s “Ideal Man-13,” a quirky perspective on the opposite sex in caricature.
- Larry Ferguson’s haunting black-and-white nightscape photo, “Midnight Mist, Antarctica.”
- Brett Anderson’s “Exercising Demons,” one of his several woodcuts in the show that explore a dark side of a different nature.
- Iggy Sumnik’s ceramic “Zulu pipe, Signs of Abuse” an industrial totem with socio-environmental issues.
- Victoria Hoyt’s pleasingly designed mixed media “Sky Claustrophobic,” less folk narrative and more semiotic.
- Andrew Johnson’s minimalist “Shepard & Vagabond;,” an elegant study in air, metal and form.
- Matt Carlson’s “Untitled (Head)” and Mike Bauer’s “Beast Thine Name Be Fear,” a contrasting study of how art gazes back upon the viewer.
- Kjell Peterson’s wall of nine ceramic tiles whose wolf designs conjure up a den of iniquity rather than kitchen or bath.
- Rebecca Herskovitz’s seductive and confessional pencil on panel, “And So I Hurt You, Again and Again.”

For budgets over $1000 consider the following:

- Christine Stormberg lives up to her last name with her ironic portrait “Minnie Mouse” which snarls attitude.
- Conversely, Sora Kimberlain’s painting, an “Untitled” twosome, is sublimely subtle in its longing and introspection.
- Susan Knight’s ephemeral cut paper “Rosette Submerged,” whose organic design is most appealing.
- Myungjin Song’s “Duck’s Cross,” a contemporary take on the more traditional style of Korean artist, Seo.
- Fulvio de Pellegrin’s “I Mandanti,” previously mentioned.
- Paolo Dolzan’s auspicious and clay animated-like portrait, “Face.”
- Julie Conway’s stunning and poetic glass light fixture, “Flamma Polarita.”
- Heidi Bartlett’s austere and elegant Victorian cut paper relief, “Revanche.”
- Liz Vercruysse’s earthen stoneware, "Pod Form as Icon," that doesn’t need its title qualification to appreciate its mythic, iconic beauty.
- Chris Machian’s trippy, black-and-white desert landscape, “Highway 97.”
- Joe Broghammer’s “The Scarlet Weight,” a nicely rendered “dry painting” that blends satire and narrative.

And now, “Best in Show” at any price, again in no particular order:
- Jennifer Balkan’s “Moths Fly to the Light,” a satirical, whimsical portrait that deserved all its pre-auction publicity.
- Mark Gilbert’s disturbing, complicated “Anthony,” a woodcut from his Portraits of Care series.
- Mary Ann Strandell’s 3D Lenticular print, “Model Home,” an ambitious site-specific wonder in architectural design.
- Shaun Richard’s “Love in the Fast Lane,” on par with the darkest imagery of Dirk Skreber.
- Fletcher Benton’s austere, contemporary metal sculpture “Folded Square Alphabet T Marquette.”
- Vera Mercer’s painterly “All Ducks, Omaha,” a pristine photographic still life in Baroque style.
- Betty Woodman’s “Balustrade Relief Vase,” an exquisitely organic and abstract puzzle of glazed earthenware.
- Colin Smith’s “Chill,” his most mature-to-date experiment in resin and pigment on aluminum.
- Matthew Kluber’s imaginative mixed media video painting, “No Place Like Utopia,” easily one of the most creative works in this auction.
- John Westmark’s “The Three Brothers,” previously mentioned.
- Mary Zicafoose’s tapestry, “Slash & Burn #1,” a vibrant, colorful contrast in perception and design.
- Bill Hoover’s “Lovers on the Beach,” also a mature thematic and stylistic leap forward in oil and sand.
- Deborah Murphy’s contrasty and geometric perspective “Little Pink” in black, white, gray and green acrylic as well, that may be the most understated gem in this show.

For more details visit bemiscenter.org.

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