

Art

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Kansas City's Sacred Spaces: Dave Ford and Ika at the Post Office

Janet Rose

A scene, American studies scholar Barry Shank once wrote, is a space where people are inspired to produce things. Shank's notion of a scene trades on continental semiotic theory to describe particular kinds of hip culture. Shank's notion derives from the "Rock 'n Roll scene in Austin, Texas," but it transfers equally well to Kansas City's current richness in the contemporary visual arts. We just happen to be in one of those magic spaces in history where we are blessed with an art scene. A perfect example of this is Dave Ford and Ika's current show, *Still in Love*, at the Old Post Office, 1229 Union.

As most people in Kansas City should have figured out by now, the visual arts live energetically in the moment in our town. Yet this energy is not readily visible in the city's Chamber, of Commerce art institutions. For the past forty years at least, contemporary art has been about ideas worked through various media such as performance, installation, the deconstructed canvas, and other postmodern notions of what constitutes the realm of the visual. Yet, the Nelson's primary evidence of living art tends to be the massive lawn over which its beautiful masonry presides. And the Kemper wavers between what seems to be a laudable and genuine impulse to embrace contemporary art and a tendency to wallpaper over that impulse with contemporary art Muzak.

No, Kansas City's real art scene lives elsewhere. The elsewhere, of course, is all of the energetic, small, independent gal-

Still in Love, David Ford and Ika, The Old Post Office through December

eries in the once-abandoned spaces of Kansas City's urban frontier. Curiously, it is the very emptiness of these deserted places that have generously nurtured what just might be one of the most alive contemporary art scenes in the United States today. Our history just won't die that easily. We are, in spite of our ongoing efforts to pretty ourselves up, an art town after all.

In many ways, it is Ika's ebullient three-dimensional pieces, tacked together from scraps of wood that set the show's tone. This is a happy show. Ika's tall precarious constructions hacked together from scraps of wood, ask us to wonder about the line between innocence and decadence. His sculptures function like yard-art totems, topped by the detritus of the

most profane aspects of pop culture — here, those ridiculous little stuffed dolls made from fabric and yarn that Ika dares to actually take seriously.

Yet it is Dave Ford's masterful paintings that give this show its depth. And, as Ford himself will explain, his work is vitally linked to the nurturing environment of Kansas City's current scene. He calls it an "ease of transference" referring to the luxurious spaces the city inadvertently offers. The standouts of his work are his pieces that blend words and images such as the boldly lyrical *It's OK* or the *I love you so much I would Kill Kill Kill*. Ford's work hovers in the realm of deconstruction, perhaps almost nostalgically so, but it does so in such a warm and generous way that we can't but feel emotionally compromised in comparison. Can anybody be that kind, really? His work often asks us to become involved in a smart yet sweet encounter with such difficult notions as love, life, and time. If, as Fredric Jameson once argued, the postmodern viewer is destined to scan endlessly the mere surfaces of culture, pasting together one prepackaged sentiment to another, Ford's attention to clunky emotion rendered in gleeful primary colors should make us stop and think for a moment, if not while we're feeling something, too.

If I have a complaint about the show, it is that it reminds us that art's quirky problem is that there are always limits to be pushed. And, while we are in the grips of this blessed and energetic scene, we must never stop interrogating just how particular pieces either take us forward or remain stuck. But this, too, is a generous problem. And one that should, of course, be central to the heavy collection of various tangential art collections such as the expensive sculpture that now weighs down the city's public art spaces. Thus, the show participates in what should be a very important dialogue in Kansas City about the importance of the relationship between the canonical collection and the living idea. It is a dialogue the city should be having right now that involves thinking carefully and energetically about what matters in art. It is a dialogue that involves thinking critically about the differences and perhaps sometimes productive tensions between the works of the Masters and the real working masters among us. It involves loosening the grip of insecurity the city seems to have about begging for Outsiders to think kindly of us. It involves interrogating, perhaps radically, the city's dedication (something that perhaps with a little verve could even spin a postmodern flair) to abandon what is real for a sanitized suburban future. Happily, it is in these abandoned and other revitalized spaces of Kansas City where Ford, Ika and the "scene" and its artists make possible

the articulation of some of our city's fundamental strengths as well as its struggles. For all of its perhaps too simple yet exciting sweetness, *Still in Love* should remind us of these powerful tensions. Situated vitally and elegantly at a unique historical moment in Kansas City's history in the visual arts, the show is something you don't want to miss.



Eric Sall's *And Justice for All* at Joseph Nease

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Visual Play in the Paintings of Eric Sall
Heather Lusfeldt

Recent paintings by Eric Sall at Joseph Nease Gallery demonstrate dynamics in tenacity and experimentation that result in a group of very interesting works. The exhibition, *More Real than Real*, runs through December 9 and features paintings that range from a series of small square works on plywood to large compositions delving into themes of painted allusions. The title alone suggests the work is based on reality, and could be construed to evoke qualities of realism. But instead of "picture perfect" images that reflect perceptions of the "real" world, the works impart a visual veracity based on physical qualities of paint, characteristics of application, and the invention of spatial forms. Describing his approach as "realistic," Sall paints a world based on more than mere perception.

He depicts form and space with an essence of simplicity, demonstrated in a series of ten small oil paintings on plywood that, like maquettes, introduce the viewer both physically and thematically to

his larger works. Bright, bold, striped, and patterned forms bend and curve in amorphous postures positioned centrally on raw grounds of natural plywood. Exploiting the natural, nuanced beauty of a relatively cheap, common material juxtaposed with odd but somehow basic forms, these small works are fresh, fun, and mirthful, engaging the viewer much like a game.

With titles like *Tall Tale*, *Makeshift*, *Soft Hitter*, and *Etched in Stone*, the small panels imply more than their basic forms suggest at first glance. Indeed, they tell a formal story. The central shapes and colors literally pop out and away from their flat, naked grounds, becoming actual objects that beg to be touched. The allusion to three dimensions, an age-old

More Real than Real, Eric Sall, Joseph Nease Gallery through December 9

objective of painters, is brought to a different, abstracted end in this context. These works suggest, due to their small size, a sort of preciousity — but they also seem coy, deliberately contrived to evoke this quality. Conceptually and formally, these paintings provide core information on surface and underlying concerns that resonate within each painting. Sall's larger works, executed with oil, acrylic, and occasionally spray paint on canvas demonstrate with more complexity the ideas put forth in the small panels — riddles of perception, form, and interpretation.

As visual objects, the larger works, some nearly seven by nine feet, are quite striking and illusionistic. The striped and patterned forms become tangible objects,

a goal articulated in Sall's artist statement. They mutate like amoebas between amorphous and anthropomorphic forms, interior furnishings and purely decorated surfaces. Their bold, almost crudely painted figures contrast with the more delicately painted grounds, which reveal a fluidity and line echoing raw wood. *Hobby*, for example, strikes the eye and body with raw, horizontal stripes of orange, green, blue, red, umber, and ochre, coalescing into a chairlike shape. The pattern, reminiscent of Guatemalan blankets, baskets, or other textiles, flits into the viewer's space then back again into a contained field. The affect of this large image is made visceral by affective illusionism, created by balancing curving and angular line and shape, raw color and painterly abstraction.

A nuance of technique and actual shape are seen in the painting *Justice for All*. Over a metallic pink shimmering ground rests an unidentified form, resembling a sort of phone, but unspicific enough to be suggestive of various things. Interspersed over transparent overlays of color within the body are thick, bold dots of burgundy, green, yellow, black, and white, reinforcing a two-dimensionality. The dynamic inclusion of the dots over muted and metallic grounds offers an array of visual treats, literally pushing and pulling the eye while we grapple with the meaning, or lack thereof, of the depicted object.

The components of *Justice for All* recollect the abstractions of Jonathan Lasker, whose paintings incorporate idiosyncratic marks and doodles, often created by paint straight from the tube. Lasker also creates large works from small maquettes or studies that are intriguing on their own, but that also articulate his working process. Sall's paintings evoke a similar tension of form, paint, and interpretation, sprinkled with a playful and sly eye that keeps the viewer guessing.

Ironically humorous is *Closest Romantic*, a large work of striped burgundy, pink and black, depicting a centralized form that resembles a beast with little feet, indicated by white dots peeking from beneath; or it could be a street-cleaner with scrubbing brushes. Another animal reference is seen in *RAF-TAT-TAT-TAT*, in which a dotted creature creeps into the composition from the right edge. This painting is one of the few examples, save a few of the smaller works on plywood, of a decentralized composition.

Sall, a 1999 graduate of the Kansas City Art Institute, demonstrates great promise in this first solo exhibition. As a whole, the show presents much to see, imagine, and remember, demonstrating the talent, fresh vision, and hard work of a serious artist at the beginning of his journey. The works exude a confidence and spontaneity, but have yet to assert themselves as definitive

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