

James Brinsfield  
Patrick Clancy  
Norma Cowdrick  
Russell Ferguson  
Stefan Lindfors  
Karen McCoy  
Amy Myers  
Michael Rees  
James Woodfill



## Perspective: Kansas City

June 23 - July 31, 1996

Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

## Perspective: Kansas City

Although Kansas City plays an almost mythic role in the popular image that 19th and 20th century America has had of itself, its present identity is less specific than that of its recent past. On a visit this year to acquaint myself with the local art scene and to select the nine artists included here, my head was abuzz with the names and cultural references that seemed to assign the city its current role as a catalyst: Charlie Parker, Robert Altman, R.M. Fischer. In visits to studios, however, a different, more down-to-earth reality presented itself. On one level, artists in Kansas City appeared less preoccupied with analyzing popular culture, or with presenting sociopolitical theories in their work. But I did encounter a surprising number of artists who had evolved their own systems for dealing with representations of place within their work. Patrick Clancy, Norma Cowdrick, Russell Ferguson, Stefan Lindfors and Karen McCoy each seemed, in his or her own way, to direct their creativity toward articulating a sense of "where" that seemed more related in spirit to the vast expanses of land that surround Kansas City than to the dense urban patterns that make up its center. At the other end of the scale, there seemed to be a striking degree of interest in what one might label "errant science," with Amy Myers, Michael Rees and James Woodfill all expressing a predilection toward this more eccentric school of research. Finally, incorporating the neo-romantic point of view represented in James Brinsfield's paintings, any generalized perspective of Kansas City's art will appear less convincing than the accumulated contributions of the individual artists who make up its fabric.

James Brinsfield has been working in a painterly manner so long that it sometimes comes as a surprise to the viewer to learn that he sees his art as stemming from a figural impulse. To begin a new piece, he works mostly with enamel on paper, achieving a surface quality that is both resilient and supple; the later addition of varnish provides an element of



James Brinsfield, *Venus Remote*, 1994, oil, enamel, amber varnish on paper, 66" x 44", collection Judy and Alan Kosloff, Kansas City, Mo.



Stefan Lindfors, *Omlarkeia*, 1995, steel, fiberglass, fluorescent lamps, 3' x 4' x 24'



Amy Myers, *Chamber Ascending*, 1996, ink, graphite, charcoal on paper, 20" x 14"

almost industrial consistency that acts in marked contrast to the vibrant colors alongside (or beneath). The resultant pictorial tension is almost narrative in nature, as Brinsfield coaxes a literal dialogue of personalities and behavior from the encroaching zones of paint and varnish. Lyrical in their content and deceptively physical in their execution, Brinsfield's paintings rely on the power of visual suggestion to draw us into an acute awareness of the way space is separated into points of relative concentration and relaxation. Color, used sparingly, strengthens our empathy toward the composition, even as we experience the tension as lying between points of maximum control and points where control can be interpreted as largely nonexistent.

Patrick Clancy's work begins from the starting point of the same discovery made by the post-conceptual artists of the late 1970s: that photography, far from being a medium in which an objective reality takes precedence, is just as subject to interpretation and manipulation as more apparently subjective forms like painting and sculpture. Bringing together his raw visual materials from a variety of sources – from self-photographed scenes to appropriated news or advertising – Clancy works both to suppress and enhance their original meaning, as well as to imply that more complex combinations of meanings emerge from the process of editing and recombination. Although many of the works take on the form of a linguistic landscape, in which the picturesque and the textual exist side-by-side, they are equally beholden to a critical intelligence in which the actual meaning of images is taken apart and put back together in unexpected combinations.

Norma Cowdrick's nightscapes of Kansas City are effective in large part due to the limitations the artist has imposed on them – they are (generally) quite small, tend to be painted from the same vantage point, and their night perspective limits their palette to a charcoal range with smudges of color articulating certain landmarks or edges of a skyline. It is an exercise among many the artist

has undertaken dealing with the edges of perception, but there are distinctive qualities to this particular series that place the work in a broader modern tradition of urban nightscapes, stretching backward from Robert Yarber through to Impressionism. Cowdrick's distinctive handling of paint, which tends to allow the physicality of pigment to highlight passages of light and color, introduces the emotional resonance that her subject might otherwise lack. In a straightforward but subtle way, these paintings deploy the city as a modern symbol of hope, as well as a beacon of human alienation, without compromising either interpretation.

Beginning from a personal analysis of world architecture that takes its focus from the deployment of the building within the landscape, Russell Ferguson has produced a strangely compelling body of work in which both drawing and sculpture enjoy an equal prominence. At first glance, his models of buildings work as witty essays on the nature of built spaces, insofar as they appear to have a precise function determined by their placement within the site. However, as soon as the viewer begins to consider the kinds of activities that might fit the bill, and compare the three-dimensional work with the panoramic-view drawings, the analysis starts to break down. Ferguson's buildings are impossible, or at least pointless, in the metaphysical sense of the word. But in their direct reference to certain Asian and Native American building styles, they do introduce the thorny issue of image and content into architectural representation. Were it actually possible to experience buildings and natural sites in the way Ferguson envisions, surrendering mere utilitarianism might not seem so disagreeable.

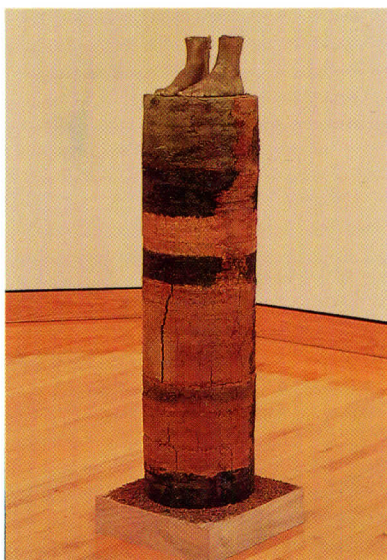
When Stefan Lindfors' work challenges the perceptions that divide so-called fine art from design and architecture, it does so from a point of view that can best be described as environmental. Not satisfied with merely providing well-designed structures that the viewer perceives as neutral, Lindfors employs a powerful sense of content to



Michael Rees, *Skin*, 1995,  
computer-generated resin-coated photograph,  
20" x 16"



Patrick Clancy, *Augur*, 1995,  
embossed photocollage,  
cast aluminum letters, oil paint, 65" x 42"



Karen McCoy, *Core Sample:  
1 Inch = 1 Year (Self-portrait at 43)*, 1994  
bronze, earth, 59" x 16" x 16"

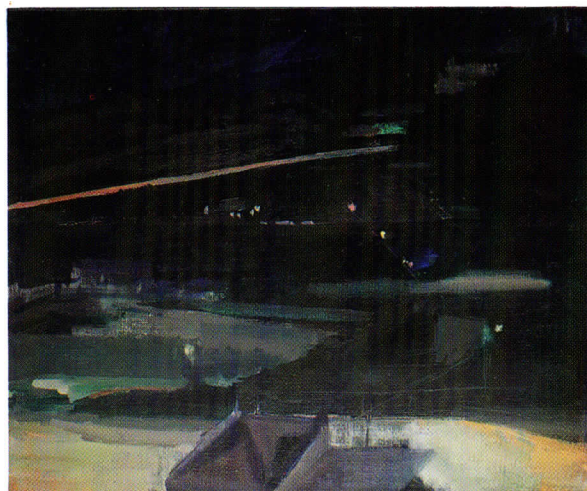
transform architectural spaces into mental theaters of an almost symbolist intensity. His installations assume the characteristic of demonstrating world views, in which the artist takes on and conveys the fears and anxieties of the collective identity. One example of this is Lindfors' concentrated investigation into the nature of insects, which is experienced both through the deployment of structural motifs that recall insect cocoons or nests, as well as by using light-projections to incorporate the actual shapes of the insects into the surrounding space. Although this interest can be explained through purely technical considerations, it is clear that Lindfors is also drawn to the almost primordial feelings that insects provoke.

The site-specific projects in natural settings that have formed a substantial part of Karen McCoy's output to date involve a distinct approach to the sensorial. Her recent *Ear-Mapping* piece, for example, consists of a series of listening stations placed at intervals along a natural walk. Each station is literally an ear trumpet placed on a rock, which the visitor uses in order to more closely experience his/her senses as directly linked to nature. Her gallery work, while more autonomous in terms of site, exhibits a similar consistency with respect to materials: *Under the Skin*, the series from which the present work has been selected, indirectly addresses the cultural representations of human beings through the use of plant materials, with her choice of botanical specimens determined as much by the look and feel of materials as by their ability to carry meaning. Although McCoy generally uses herself as the starting point for each figure, they do not present themselves as self-portraits so much as figures constructed out of landscape.

The drawings of Amy Myers provide an almost textbook example of how the once-exotic surrealist combination of body and machine has become an increasingly natural area for current artists to explore. Although they sometimes strike the viewer as being so scientific that they could serve as laboratory diagrams for some strange experiment,



Russell Ferguson, *Bread Towers and Landscape*, 1996, wood, dye, charcoal, paper, 20 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 116 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (drawing), 53" x 14" x 10" and 60" x 16" x 11" (towers), collection David Hughes, Kansas City, Mo.



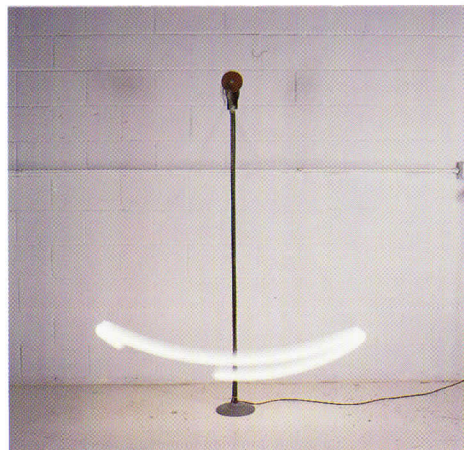
Norma Cowdrick, *Night #3*, 1995, oil on canvas, 15" x 18"

Myers' works also have a surprisingly hesitant, even plaintive, edge that belies their labored, almost obsessive character as drawings. They could probably have been either designed or executed by computers, but the fact that they are hand-executed lends them an air of contemplative earnestness that would be hard to imagine emerging from a printer. With more than a trace of science-fiction irony, Amy Myers reminds us that just as machines are often described as having their vulnerable side, so are humans eminently capable of acting and thinking of themselves as complete automatons.

As a sculptor/designer working at the cutting edge of computers and industrial production, Michael Rees' interest in the nature of animal life appears at first to be largely design-driven. But his prototype life-forms, which had previously been rendered in relatively traditional materials, are actually experiments into the cycle of life-creation itself. For Rees, the only subject that befits the visual artist is a description of the way our nature as creatures seems to generate a projection of the world around us, shaped to fit our changing needs and priorities. With the rapid sophistication of computer imaging processes transforming the Pygmalion myth of the artist – as one who literally breathes life into his materials – into an achievable goal, Rees' forays into the language of biological form have the feeling of a bizarre

case study in how one might efficiently construct beings whose existence within the world is based entirely on our capacity to see them as plausible. They also serve as a sobering reminder that the line between imagining reality and creating it is increasingly one of semantics alone.

James Woodfill's work describes a muffled zone of expression that behaves like a side-effect to the world of technology and communications, a space where the intended message and the message received are rarely the same thing. Linking his work to the youthful mythology of rock music, Woodfill selects parts of old amplifiers and radios for their function and aesthetic appeal, then rewires them or interfaces them in such a way that the signal becomes intentionally misappropriated:



James Woodfill, *Pendulum*, 1994, mixed media, 72" x 4" x 18"

the pulse of a radio signal charges and discharges a bare light bulb; the sound card from an electronic organ provides the signal for a video monitor; or a computer monitor displays an ongoing radio program that remains inaudible. These works have their obvious visceral charms, but they are also slightly sinister, as if they point to a hidden intelligence that plays subtle havoc with our sense of orientation. In Woodfill's world view, the sheer randomness of technology provides a new threshold of everyday surrealism.

– Dan Cameron, Senior Curator  
New Museum of Contemporary Art, NY

#### Acknowledgments

We are extremely grateful to the artists who are included in this exhibition. At the same time, we extend our sincerest thanks to all artists who participated in the curatorial process, as well as Heidi Bilardo (public art administrator for the City of Kansas City, Mo.) and Mark Spencer (director of the Albrecht-Kemper Museum, St. Joseph, Mo.) for their assistance.

Dan Cameron is also owed our deepest thanks for so enthusiastically embracing this project. His insight, energy and humor were greatly appreciated during the organization of this show.

Finally, we are indebted to Barton P. and Mary Davidson Cohen for so generously underwriting this exhibit through their endowment for the performing and visual arts.

– Bruce Hartman, Director, Gallery of Art

*All works are courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted.*

Cover photo: Art Miller, Kansas City skyline, 1996.