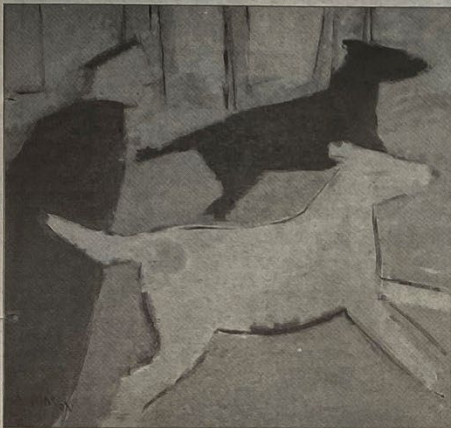


ARTIST UNLEASHES ENERGY WITH ANIMAL IMAGES



'Winter Walk' (2000), by Marie Mason

Images courtesy of Blue Gallery

By ROBIN TRAFTON
Special to The Star

Since opening six months ago, the Blue Gallery has been exhibiting both local and national artists in its roomy, industrial-chic gallery space in the Crossroads Art District.

In a solo exhibition titled "Animal Magnetism," local artist Marie Mason shows new acrylic paintings on canvas and a few works on paper that reflect on the emotional intimacies of animal and human relationships — with mixed results.

Mason, who has a bachelor's of fine arts degree from the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, moved to Kansas City in 1980. In her artist statement, she attributes her relocation to the Midwest to her work's more introspective direction. "I paint about whatever turns the head of my consciousness/unconscious mind ... often, it's the ges-

THE SHOW

■ "Marie Mason: Animal Magnetism" continues at the Blue Gallery, 7 W. 19th St. through Saturday. Hours are noon to 10 p.m. today and Saturday. Call (816) 527-0823 for information.

ture of a moment or feeling." "Animal Magnetism's" painted menagerie includes dogs, chickens and circus animals, executed in a straightforward, uncomplicated style. The large, unframed canvases skip between creamy pastels and dark brooding hues, only sometimes merging in a single piece.

Most of these simple compositions of flattened subjects have dark sketchy outlines, limited detail and unrealistic color, reflecting Mason's attempt to capture the spiritual essence of her subjects rather than their outward appearance. Mason is at her best when she keeps her goals simple and her

compositions loose and fresh. Dog owners will surely appreciate the warm spirit of companionship in her many portraits of man's best friend.

In "Winter Walk," an abstracted profile of a person leans apprehensively into a cold winter wind. Out in front, two cut-out shapes of dogs, playfully bounding into the dull winter landscape, enthusiastically lead the way. The simplified shapes are unstructured and blurred, lending the composition the raw energy of a cave painting.

The sincerity of the artist's message and appreciation for her pet's love of life and unconditional devotion is reinforced by Mason's donation of 10 percent of all sales to Kansas City's Wayside Waifs humane society.

A few works break away from single figure and animal motifs to achieve a positively whimsical feel. The watercolor "Circus Magic" depicts three abstracted men in tuxedos performing in a circus ring spotlight. A balanced composition, ☛

REVIEW

Sculptor captures opposites in bodily forms

By KATE HACKMAN
Special to The Star

What one sees in the ceramic sculptures of Stephen Fleming now at Joseph Nease Gallery is perhaps as much an indication of the individual viewer's psychology as it is directly determined by the works themselves. Delicate bisque or rich black, elegant but undeniably sensual, these wall-mounted objects might be read as pure abstractions or as almost explicit representations of bodily flesh.

"Ether/ore," the exhibition title uniting the three dozen untitled works, emphasizes this duality and resistance to fixed meaning — "ether," referencing their otherworldly, elusive, ethereal quality; "ore," anchoring them to the present, to the Earth, to their material being as solid clay and immediate form.

Currently the director of the Roswell Artist-in-Residence Program in Roswell, N.M., Fleming formerly taught at the Kansas City Art Institute as assistant professor in the foundations and painting departments. These sculptures represent a departure from his previous work as a figurative painter, but, as he notes himself, vestiges of recognizable forms tend to emerge. This is not surprising, as his hands-on, intuitive, process-oriented approach — whereby a square block of clay is "pulled, pushed, paddled, pinched,



Two untitled works in clay by Stephen Fleming, part of his exhibit 'ether/ore' at the Joseph Nease Gallery

Courtesy of Joseph Nease Gallery



robed, poked, pierced, cut, squeezed, shaved, rubbed and fondled" and thus transformed — allows for the expression of subconscious concerns.

Akin to sculptor Louise Bourgeois, for example, in allowing for a sort of "return of the repressed," Fleming states, "ultimately, these sculptures are the products of something inside of me, revealing what I had not known before of myself."

The result is a group of closely related works that evoke fragments of bodies, organs or pure flesh, and that embody contrasts between containment and release, aggression and reserve, strength and vulnerability,

Ranging in size from several inches to a few feet across (the largest sculpted from a 25-pound block of clay), they curve out from the wall to engage the viewer directly and intimately, inviting a 180-degree spectrum of perspectives.

Recurring throughout is the use of a pulmonary vein or aorta-like form, extending as one or multiple appendages off the more compact, main sculptural body. Sliced at the end to expose an interior cavity, these read as orifices or as the stems of arms or legs or throats, which have been chopped short. As such they are the most disturbing and aggressive parts of the works, evoking

the violence of dismemberment or suggesting sucking or spitting actions. At the same time they engage a dialogue between interior and exterior, open and closed — representing a sense of release from the often compressed, folded, curled, bunched, bound, contorted central forms.

Fleming's best works are those that feel more like metaphors for states of being than explicit representations. Although he is powerfully adept at conveying a sense of excessive, undulating flesh, this is most effective when applied to enigmatic forms rather than to the rendering of what seems recognizable as a bent high

THE SHOW

■ "Stephen Fleming: ether/ore" continues at the Joseph Nease Gallery, 1819 Central, through March 31. Hours are noon to 5 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and by appointment. Call (816) 421-2166 for information.

or torqued hip.

Strong, too, are those sculptures that convey a sense of internal tension. From one giant tuberlike body stretches an elongated trunk that extends forward to insert into a central orifice, thus evoking some kind of primitive, self-sustaining life form, feeding off itself. This work is deeply satisfying — as an abstract form and as an earthy representation of an elemental gesture. Another work resembles a pillowlike mass of luxuriously rippling flesh with closely cropped appendages extending from each corner. As if pale skin bared to the sun for the first time, it captures a sense of torment at wide-open exposure.

"Ether/ore" shows Fleming experimenting in a new media and manner of working. By limiting himself to a spare palette, he allows these lush forms to speak unencumbered, while at the same time achieving mysterious surfaces, suggestive of eggshells, marble, or skin wanting to be touched. One hopes he will continue in this vein, striving to strike a resonantly human chord without slipping into the didactic.