

'True North' show puts color and humanity on the grid

Brinsfield brings life to medium by expanding its limits

By SCOTT CANTRELL
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The grid is back. The grid that, starting around 1920, Piet Mondrian made one of the defining images of 20th-century art.

But, this being the age of post-modern irony, James Brinsfield puts his own slant — literally — on the grids in a group of recent abstract paintings now on display at the Joseph Nease Gallery. Brinsfield, born and educated in Chicago, a Kansas City resident since 1991 and now an adjunct professor at the Kansas City Art Institute, is the second artist to be exhibited at the new gallery.

Set just off right angles, these are no flat, ruler-lined checkerboards, but freehand fretworks. And, by contrast with the flat surfaces of Mondrian's mature paintings, Brinsfield's are richly layered with painterly textures.

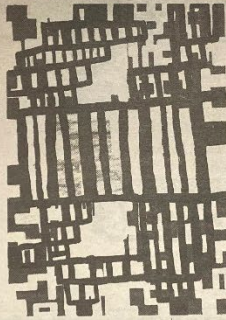
REVIEW

■ "James Brinsfield — True North" will be on display at the Joseph Nease Gallery, 1819 Central Ave., through Jan. 9, 1999. Hours are noon to 5 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and by appointment; call 421-2166.

(Seen in the flesh, Mondrians are far more textured than they appear in reproductions. And Mondrian was very much interested in the way grids and colored panels create illusions of depth.)

Not being aligned with the patches of color beneath, Brinsfield's slathered black-enamel grids give a strong 3-D feeling. The foreground-background dialogue is especially conspicuous in the paired "Moonlight Drive" paintings. If Mondrian's canvases — with the exception of "confetti" pieces like "Broadway Boogie Woogie" — tend to be relatively static in effect, Brinsfield's are very much alive.

The surface interest is underlined



James Brinsfield's "Super Freak" is part of his show "True North," now at the Joseph Nease Gallery.

by the exhibit's juxtaposing four large grid paintings with six smaller ones, some of the latter actually studies for the larger canvases. In the larger paintings the surface itself — visibly separate pieces of paper glued to the canvas — has a life of its own.

Even when a small and a large

painting share an identical pattern, the larger one has, as it were, a richer inner life. Some of the patches and patterns of blue and reddish orange are modulated and textured by white enamel washes spread over still-wet paint, giving a moiré effect.

Brinsfield also enlivens surfaces — and lends a certain mystery — by overpainting shapes. And he's unafraid of the odd splotch and dribble: There's a human being at work here, not a photocopy machine.

Grids are only part of what Brinsfield is up to. But the other paintings in this exhibit also suggest sly, coded allusions to earlier 20th-century art, a leitmotif in contemporary abstraction.

To Brinsfield's credit, though, the allusions are just that, never anything approaching quotation. Recognition of the familiar within the unfamiliar may be the basic of all artistic communication, and Brinsfield's pieces are communicative in quite visceral ways.

With their matrices of oozy rectangles, "Rubber Wrapped in Onions" and "Undertow" suggest

abstractions from the demonic imaginary machines painted in the 'teens of the century by Duchamp and Picabia. "Madhouse" is a kind of ironic American flag — Jasper Johns, anyone? — with black and white stripes; squarish "stars" are given sculptural relief with modeling paste.

There's a bit of social commentary, too, in the two "Promiscuity" paintings, large and small. White circles exuding tendrils constitute a kind of ironic family tree in the age of AIDS.

What makes this exhibit particularly compelling is its concentrated exploration of repeated motifs in Brinsfield's work, all here from 1998.

These are bold, confident, provocative paintings — but with a kind of childlike wonder to them. And viewers who know their 20th-century art will feel themselves in friendly — if hardly predictable — territory.

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