

Ground control to major art

KATE HACKMAN
Special to The Star

At toys, extension cords, Christmas lights, beach towels, plastic gems and orange mesh may not be the most conventional of art materials. But in the 21st century and beyond, they may just be the norm. For "Space Oddity" at Joseph Nease Gallery, the dozen artists included were encouraged to have fun and think strange.

The exhibition draws together nine Kansas City-based artists and three from other cities, most of whom have had solo exhibitions at the gallery in the past. Many created pieces specifically for the exhibition — some embracing the theme of "Space Oddity" explicitly in relation to outer space, others focusing primarily on investigating formal spatial relationships.

Oddness is the general rule. Throughout runs electric color and a sense of play, making for an energetic exhibition that feels rather more cohesive than the typical big summer group show.

New York artist John Torreano's work is perhaps most naturally suited for this context. His "Wall Ball" installation includes dozens of variously sized, candy-colored wood "balls," cut flush and affixed to two adjacent walls and the corner between in a scattered floor-to-ceiling arrangement. Embedded with acrylic gems that sparkle under track lights, the seductive balls suggest spectacular planets, each one unique, together composing an exotic disco-style universe.

Jessica Snow, a San Francisco-based artist Nease contacted after discovering her work in the "Pierogi Flatfiles" show at H&R Block Art-space, took the David Bowie song, also titled "Space Oddity," as inspiration. The five intimate works on paper that make up "Major Tom's Journal" whimsically imagine what the Bowie character would have seen from his spaceship. Capturing a childlike sense of fantasy, the snakes of rainbow-colored squares, networks of cellular forms, gorgeous targetlike orbs, faintly drawn constellations and mazelike trails of pink lines that populate her pages feel simultaneously micro- and macrocosmic, enticing as delicate, detailed abstractions while doubling as maps of a dreamlike outer space.

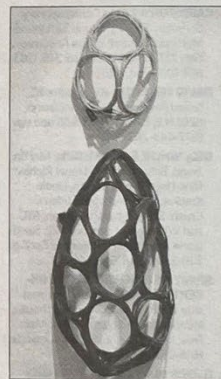
Several works focus on the manipulation of a single material in relationship to the space around it. James Woodfill's series of "extension cords" are precisely that — straight from the hardware store; blue, yellow, black and orange. Known for kinetic and illuminating sculptures and installations, Woodfill here winds each cord into a hive of abutting ellipses, held in place by zip ties.



"Space Race," by James Brinsfield; "Enfold," by Marcie Miller Gross; and "Over the Edge," by Shaun Cassidy, are all part of the "Space Oddity" exhibit at Joseph Nease Gallery, 1819 Central.



"Eye Bomb," 2001, by John Torreano



"extension cords: yellow/black" by James Woodfill

THE SHOW

"Space Oddity" continues at Joseph Nease Gallery, 1819 Central, through June 30. Hours are noon to 5 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and by appointment. Call (816) 421-2166 for information.

Like pliable shields designed for some as-yet-unheard-of activity, the slightly sagging wall-hung works, displayed in a grid of four with a fifth dangling alone nearby, reference the body while conveying an enjoyable absurdity. Disconnected and unplugged, the objectified cords seem to hint at a future when they (and we?) will be rendered useless.

A stack of brightly patterned towels, folded into one another to form an interlocking stack that rises in the middle and slouches at the sides, sits atop a pedestal to comprise Marcie Miller Gross' "Enfold." Like Woodfill, Miller Gross references minimalist sculpture by adopting the use of a repeating unit, yet the intended function of the materials employed remains readily apparent. Her tower of towels and a higher tower of folded hospital blankets nearby ("Envelop") evoke thoughts of obsessively folded piles of Gap garments. However, these worn, faded, utilitarian textiles embody a history of warmth and comfort provided, and so, knitted together here through the compressive folding process, feel more like surrogates for human beings than commercial displays.

Several other works suggest alien creatures. From a large horizontal loop of painted-pink steel tubing in Shaun Cassidy's "Over the Edge" extends a lanky leg whose gesture evokes an awkward first step onto another planet. Judith Sanazar's diptych "Spaced Invader" features thickly painted recollections of familiar Atari characters, their luscious, starlike bodies targeted by a field of iconic red arrows. Three stuffed, columnlike, sewn fabric assemblages by Rachel Hayes stand in a row against one wall, their brownish, leatherlike "skins" interrupted by bright bands of mesh or vinyl or plastic, as if strange hybrid beings — sluglike, but high-tech.

Also featured are high-energy, unconventional "paintings" by Nate Fors, Lester Goldman and James Brinsfield, whose childlike renderings of humans and pets in spaceships suggest a nostalgic sense of "the future." Two elegant oil paintings by Karen Owsley Nease, whose converging forms speak subtly of the exertion of universal forces, and a huge, dynamically charged, nicely awkward painting by Eric Sall complete the show.



MARCIO JOSE SANCHEZ/The Kansas City Star

A sign on the window of Zone Gallery, 1914 Wyandotte, announces that the art gallery is a "Cow Free Zone."

Where's the beef? Look in 'Cow Free Zones'

Crossroads artists separate themselves from CowParade

By ALICE THORSON
The Kansas City Star

Driving from downtown to the 'laza, it may seem like those painted cows are everywhere. They're hewing their cud within spitting distance of the Alexander Calder "Shiva" sculpture at Pershing and Grand, reposing under Kenneth Inelson's "Triple Crown" south of Crown Center and seemingly multiplying faster than rabbits on the Plaza.

But they're not quite everywhere. Those spending the summer suffering from maddened-by-the-cows disease are finding some relief from it all in the growing number of "Cow Free Zones" concentrated in the Crossroads Art District.

You know you're in one from the Day-Glo orange signs, bright as new traffic cones, proclaiming "This is a Cow Free Zone." There's one on the window of Zone Gallery at 1914 Wyandotte, another across the street at the Downtown Neon Gallery, more in the windows at Dolphin gallery and framing, and the idea seems to be catching on.

Much of the most vocal opposition to the Kansas City CowParade, when it came before the Municipal Art Commission last summer, was from artists and their supporters in the Crossroads Art District. When the project got the green light from the city despite Art Commission opposition, many local artists decided to boycott it.

Kansas City artist Larry Buechel, who works as studio director at Grand Arts contemporary art space in the Crossroads Art District, conceived and designed the "This is a Cow Free Zone" posters.

In a recent interview, Buechel said he was not part of last summer's initial opposition to the project. But having seen the cows in Chicago in summer 1999 and in New York in summer 2000, he began to feel that "The cows are following me around everywhere," when they started showing up in Kansas City in early June.

"This has gone overboard," he remarked. "We've had people come in to Grand Arts and ask, 'Do you have any cows here?'"

"Everybody's relating them to the art world," he observed. "The art world is not part of this."

Buechel said he devised the poster "as a subtle hint that we do have cow free zones."

About 10 days ago, he began passing out posters in the Crossroads Art District and discovered that the art world did want to be part of his commentary on the painted cows.

Neon artist Thomas Cobian, owner of Downtown Neon Gallery, has one of the cow-free posters in his window.

"The fact is that the cows have been done before," he said, voicing a concern raised early on about the CowParade. "Kansas City needs to come up with something original."

John O'Brien, owner of Dolphin, said he thought from the beginning that it was disrespectful to expect serious artists to paint cows.

"We don't want them down here," he said. "I'm glad I don't have to look at them."

"None of us are trying to be art snobs," he added. "They weren't art to start with."

Buechel is pleased that his posters have been such a hit.

"I didn't know they were going to be such a popular item," he said. "I made a few, I had to make some more, I made them 'til I ran out of paper."

Now, some are clamoring for T-shirts.