

Gary John Gresl: An Assembler

A small cabinet contains some unlabeled and unidentifiable pickled vegetables and jellied fruits—and dime store Indianhead salt and pepper shakers. But the contents are obscured by the cabinet itself, which is thoroughly encrusted with multi-hued buttons, old Christmas light bulbs, miniature statuary, vintage cameos. It is festooned with hemp, rawhide, feathers, and strings of beadwork. A familiar looking sock puppet monkey hangs ignominiously off to the side. An old enameled tin spoon stands at attention atop it all. It is a commanding gesture, but one left open to interpretation.

This is one of the more restrained and contained assemblages by Gary John Gresl in his current show at Mount Mary College's Marion Gallery. Some of the more flamboyant installations feature human and animal skulls, stuffed deer with racks of antlers, rifles, feathered arrows, fishing paraphernalia, full-scale farm implements and other machinery. Gresl calls himself "an assembler," which is an understatement.

Gresl told me that his work is inspired by the environments and people of his youth: "cabins, fishing holes, farms with their dried corn stalks and haylofts, attics and country auctions, and the good unpolished people that were my aunts and uncles, cousins and friends, all Wisconsinites." But, although the work at a superficial glance appears to be rough and haphazard, his ideas are anything but unpolished. Art that suggests hunting lodge décor or a fisherman's wharf are often pigeonholed or, worse, dismissed by the art establishment. (I was happy to see some of this work at UWM's INOVA gallery recently, an indication perhaps that Milwaukee's art establishment has a healthy willingness to transcend traditional dichotomies.) This work deserves serious consideration and careful scrutiny is rewarded with layered meanings and potent symbolism.

Gresl counts Robert Rauschenberg and the abstract expressionists among his many influences and considers Franz Kline, "with his huge bold black and white strokes" a favorite. The connection could easily be overlooked, but the relationship is there in the extravagant gestures of thick rope, steel barrel staves, worn wagon wheels, and—yes—antlers and bones.

One piece in particular, intriguingly titled "What We Found After I Opened It," easily recalls Jackson Pollock or even Frank Stella's more recent high relief sculptures without losing a sense of its own identity.

Art has the power to provoke, to delight, to disturb, and to surprise. It is a rare work of art that can do all of these things. Art can be sensory, intellectual, emotional. The successful combination of all three of these modalities is likewise a rare achievement. This show, subtitled "New and Old Works, Large and Small," is both a retrospective and a tour de force. It is a truism among serious art patrons that an authentic experience of original work is lost when it is seen in reproduction. That is especially true of sculpture—and, I will confidently assert, most definitely true of this exhibit.

It will come as no surprise that for several decades Gresl made his living as an antique dealer. In fact, I first met him in his shop in Milwaukee's Third Ward, a typically dusty and cluttered establishment full of potential treasures. "I chose that occupation for the most part because the objects fascinated me. Handling antiques and collectibles have provided me with opportunities for learning: . . . their design . . . their history . . . their sometimes peculiar and enlightening place in cultures. They bring [to my sculptures] that sort of multi-layered history with the associations and possibility to create metaphors."

Gresl's love of materiality is self-evident in his artwork. The conceptual rigor that lies beneath the encrusted cabinetry takes more effort to appreciate. But it is well worth it. As indicated parenthetically in the exhibition title—"possible solo finale"—this may be the last opportunity to see his work in this breadth and depth. While reassuring me that he is in good health Gresl conceded that the physical effort and financial investment that are required to produce, transport, and install such elaborate pieces are taking their toll.

Perhaps this is one reason why the labor-intensive installations are supplemented with images of what Gresl calls "Outstallations." These are interventions in the landscape that become available in the gallery setting through meticulously composed photographs. While I personally find the installations richer in texture, denser with metaphoric possibility, and packing a more powerful emotional punch, I look forward to seeing how this new phase of Gresl's long career develops.

The exhibit opened last weekend but the "opening reception" is Sunday, September 16, 2–4 pm. The show runs through October 27.

The Marion Gallery is in Caroline Hall on the Mount Mary College campus at 2900 N. Menomonee River Parkway, Milwaukee.