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“Art in the best sense is rooted in self-expression and whether naïve or sophisticated is self-contained. In our spiritual growth genius and talent must more and more choose the role of group expression, or even at times the role of free individualistic expression — in a word must choose art and put aside propaganda.”

—Alain Locke, “Art or Propaganda” (1928)

Editorial: Regionalism and Curatorial Practice

It is possible that regionalism is more a problem of curation than it is a problem of artmaking ordinarily conceived. This would make sense given that, as was painting for Modernism, the primary medium for Contemporary Art is curation. Regionalism, as MAQ continues to argue, is one way of both conceptualizing and beginning to execute artistic practice during and after the demise of the Contemporary. Perhaps, then, an approach to curation attuned to the anticipatory demands of a regional artistic movement would likewise be an aesthetic mode oriented towards a resolution or transcendence of Contemporary problematics. In other words, it may be the case that to experiment with the “specificity” of curation as an artistic medium is *ipso facto* to engage with current art in a regionalist way (and therefore also to pursue some sort of historical sublation of the Contemporary).

To curate is to select and to spatially arrange an artwork or group of artworks with the aim of creating a total effect that is not reducible to any individual “piece.” In the case of installation art or muscularly curated thematic exhibitions — both of which are echt Contemporary — total effect subordinates discrete works of art; in a sense, totality *is* the motor for the production of aesthetic experiences for these sorts of presentations. More traditionally, discrete works of art might be imbued with special meanings as a result of the framework they are placed within, but ultimately, the experiential onus is placed on individual objects, which are treated as if they contain aesthetic content irrespective of their curatorial context. (This is how, say, museums handle the paintings they show.) In such cases, however, the overall curatorial effect is no less determinative of how artworks function. It is just instrumentalized to orient viewers towards the fact that artworks come down to us through particular historical trajectories, and these trajectories ground what it’s possible to see in and to feel about historical artworks in the present. The intended overall effect of traditional curation is, in effect, historical sensibility.

If the Contemporary period has been defined by a naturalization of the postmodern idea that historical narratives are absolutely contingent — moldable by (and for) individuals — curation has been its cardinal medium because the material of curation is, quite literally, history. Traditional curating has tended, strategically, to elide the fact that it creates meaning when it historicizes and aestheticizes objects: it requires us to suspend our disbelief in the aesthetic autonomy of artworks. Inversely, the paradigmatically Contemporary curatorial mode has mostly failed to recognize that, by freely associating objects into idiosyncratic new networks of meaning, what it does is create, out of wholecloth, hyper-local historical contexts for the artworks it arranges: a Contemporary exhibition is a historical situation in microcosm, experienced as a concrete, self-contained, perpetually present fact.

Regionalism provides an opportunity for synthesizing these two apparently incommensurable modes of curatorial practice. To curate in a way that might contribute to the development of a regional sensibility or style would entail — with full knowledge of the epistemological foolishness of such a pursuit — making partisan, ideological, circumscribing claims about the formal demands that history and geography place on the current art of a particular region. It would mean taking

an ideological stance about the shape of art to come, in spite of the unavoidable fact that art's shape is only ever determined by the contingencies of the moment in which it is considered. A regionalist exhibition would, almost by definition, be an exhibition that uses the mutability of artistic meaning (the very thing that has made recent art Contemporary) as a tool for proposing and experimenting towards immutable configurations of formal possibilities — regionally binding stylistic principles. In a word, regionalist curation would set out to make history, not only against the grain of the spectral nature of history, but using this spectrality against itself as a means of locating within it something firm and enduring.

Practically, this would mean curating exhibitions of regional art that stake claims about its history, purport to speak for its present, and intend to mold its future. That the Contemporary has muddled the past, frayed the present, and confused the future of regional artistic production does not preclude such an approach; in fact, its possibility is grounded in the current contemporaneity of regional art. Right now, there are no styles anywhere apart from the global non-style of Contemporary Art. Intervening in this fact by claiming the existence of something besides all the sameness would not only be *outré*; it would be demonstrably incorrect. It might result in dismissal and disagreement on formal principles and opposition and factionalism. This would all, of course, be wrong, and it would all be about nothing — but it only ever is. Such ideological activity would itself be the aim and the end of a regionalist curatorial practice.

—T.S.

French Curve Gallery and Kingsbury Gallery

John Bjerklie: The St. Louis Years

May 31-July 28



Installation view of *The Four Concists* (left), *Untitled (Trinity)* (middle), and *Prayer Warriors* (right), from *John Bjerklie: The St. Louis Years*. Photo by Troy Sherman.

John Bjerklie’s dynamic painting career spanned — and one might say transcended — St. Louis and New York. This two-venue exhibition is devoted to his time in the Midwest. A committed and prolific artist of “unbridled energy,” Bjerklie was the rare artist for whom painting was a spiritual activity. As such, he ought to be duly remembered amidst the dispassionate, institutionalized Contemporary style that nevertheless longs for spirit in so many ways. Bjerklie’s paintings—which range from Diebenkorn-like constructions to cut plywood reliefs—embody a unique fusion of concept and paint.

Bjerklie was a painter-thinker who found an inherent value in the creative process itself. Art wasn’t a means towards something else but a self-evident activity, offering profound meaning and sustenance. This passion shows in the painting, which is acutely sensitive to color relationships and proportion. Only upon deeper inspection does one notice that many of the abstract canvases are clearly cut and pasted together, in a collage of colorfields. Not that the technique matters much, but it does show how a kind of chaotic *art brut* style (when done right) can create majestic, abstract pictures.

One true standout is a triptych—in rosy hues, meditative oranges, and pale blues—titled *He Has Pitched a Tent for The Sun*, which for me evoked a transcendental interior glow, the kind that may descend on one in deep meditation or reverie. Young artists could learn much from Bjerklie, who constructed his own mythologies as a stimulus for creation, and devoted an entire life to the idea that art is more than mere entertainment.

—B.S.

Houska Gallery

Nick Schleicher: Baja Blast

May 17-July 5



Installation view of *DBL-CB* (left) and *B/A-SYT* (right), from *Nick Schleicher: Baja Blast*. Photo by Troy Sherman.

Houska's cram-it-all-in curatorial approach does not tend to do favors for the art it shows. This is especially a problem for Schleicher, whose squeegee method puts his work right on the edge of both repetition and decoration. Cramming often makes art seem repetitive and decorative. Despite this, a number of individual works in *Baja Blast* stand out. Something more significant than these individual standouts — something gotten at through precise curation and an understanding of how easy it is to get queasy from consuming too many of Schleicher's sugary paintings all at once — could have been achieved with some culling and some deliberation. But I imagine the economics of St. Louis galleries are such that it's suicide to do anything other than stuff your space, so I'm not really sure who to blame here.

The two best paintings are an asymmetrical blue-and-green oval and a mid-mitosis pink-and-yellow blob, both hung in a forlorn high-up corner of the gallery (not a bad choice, actually) with a ceramic piece by some other artist plopped right in front of them (definitely a bad choice). Of these two, the blue-and-green one, which is smaller, wins. While its right edge curves fairly regularly, its left bumps out more than it seems like it should, getting wonky and truncated-looking near the bottom, which makes the whole thing appear tumidly alive. This aliveness of shape imparts on the roving, blending, clashing shades inside the picture's border a sense of purposefulness, as if the random-ish movements of the colors are the agents of the irregularity of the structure supporting them. The weighting of green at the bottom of the painting and its failure to entirely rim the oval — blue pokes through at the top edge and, even better, very slightly at the left — contribute to the sense one gets of there being reciprocity between color and structure in Schleicher's paintings.

Schleicher's weaker works often fail to find a shape that isn't so subtly unique, almost uncanny. This leaves his colors looking confectionary, their configurations arbitrary.

—T.S.

The Luminary

Considering St. Louis

May 31-July 20



Installation view of works by Jess Dugan (left) and Tiff Sutton (right), as well as a curatorial thing by Ciera Alyse McKissick (right foreground), from *Considering St. Louis*. Photo by Troy Sherman.

The organizers of *Considering St. Louis*, an exhibition about art in this city, chose a decisively retrograde approach to curating regional art. The exhibition ventures no observations (not even tentative or qualified ones) about what art in St. Louis is, how it works, or what might be distinct about it. Instead, it presents a disparate range of artworks corralled by no curatorial idea besides, “These things came from St. Louis.” It’s no innovation to observe that art gets made here — art literally gets made wherever there are people. Nor is it necessary to mention, as the exhibition amply does, that artists in St. Louis lack the old “umbilical cord of gold” — don’t worry, they know. By failing to do anything else but gape at how exceptional it is that St. Louisans produce any art at all, *Considering St. Louis* actually cements the view that regional art is small and scattered and derivative.

The show is ultimately an attempt at making St. Louis art continuous with art everywhere else. What it should have been — what a progressive regional artistic movement would require — is a biased, limited, discriminating argument about the formal traits that are common to this city’s best current art. Right or wrong, inclusive or otherwise, such an argument would give other St. Louis artists a view of what St. Louis art is, a view that they could then either adhere to or react against. If nothing else, this would be catalyzing.

It would be possible to curate such a show in St. Louis because artists here are doing a lot more than kvetching about the fact that it’s tough to be an artist in the postindustrial Midwest. That’s hard to tell from *Considering St. Louis*, though. Aside from the fact that the works in the exhibition have little to do with each other, there is way more space devoted to para-artistic curatorial initiatives than to any one actual artist-made artwork. Without exception, these intrusions are intended to impress upon viewers how cool and curious it is that there are any art exhibitions at all way out here in Missouri. Oh, and there’s bricks, cuz... it’s St. Louis.

This is all especially a shame because many of the inclusions are good enough on their own terms to have grounded a more visionary curatorial project, one with claims to make about where this region's art might go. Taylor Yocom's video and Tiff Sutton's photo banners are certainly up to something.

—T.S.

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum

Kahlil Robert Irving: Archaeology of the Present

February 23-July 29



Installation view of *Kahlil Robert Irving: Archaeology of the Present*. Photo by Troy Sherman.

Aesthetic beauty and resolute knowledge provide false closure; knowing the present is experiencing constant death, and the necessity/impossibility of knowledge exacerbates the grief of somehow needing to know more about what we already know. Irving's dig site, meanwhile, meets the temporal rifts between you and collapsed time with humor, sarcasm, softness and grace. His archaeology will make you taste the desire to exhume and to know, with the proper limits.

The cracked caverns of **Caution** *M.A.S.S*(in the bank) | *Media flow* + **Ground Swell** / *Pipes tubes Chimney* (reminiscent of the infrastructural bedrock of St. Louis) are oil-slicked wells gilded with lustrous metal and waste. This earthen crust shrines quintessentially Midwestern artifacts; complex nostalgia abounds. Ceramic apples (like the ones on grandmother's windowsill) meet newspaper clippings layered on tweets evidencing racism in the region. Stepping away reveals a city model: a golden piggybank I did not notice while close is the only discernible shape from afar, soaring above *Caution's* toppling skyline as if a parade balloon for the free market.

Irving's other symbolically conceptual works capture a dispersed energy that feels compressed in *Caution*. Most and least vexing among these is **Stele** [*A scraper*]. You can knock on this tall, hollow, brick-tile structure and imagine that all postmodern architecture's failures crumble by your hand. The cold, textured granite of **Tomb Raider** (*archaeology of the present*) **BLACK GRANITE** [1] reminded me of the way many of Saidiya Hartman's passages in *Venus in Two Acts* begin: "I could, I would, I

must, I cannot, and but I want.” Her grammar admits perpetual conditionals, necessary limits that respect the dead to “achieve an impossible goal: redressing the violence that produced numbers, ciphers, and fragments of discourse.” A curatorial text describing *Tomb Raider* implies that somewhere on its surface is a QR code; a friend and I searched in vain, only to find it halved and unscannable. There is a silence that can’t be known, only touched as a process of searching, felt without full facts, glimpsed obliquely. Silence is silence; what are the conditions that have begotten it?

—S.S.

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum

Slingshot: 2024 MFA in Visual Art Thesis Exhibition

May 3-July 29



Installation view of works by (left to right) Sarah Moon, Lynne Smith, Micah Mickles, Emily Elhoffer, from *Slingshot: 2024 MFA in Visual Art Thesis Exhibition*. Photo by Troy Sherman.

I should focus on the art in this show, but given its context I’ve gotta digress about how bizarre and ineffectual the current system of official art education is. On the one hand, Contemporary Art is a hyperbole of the-artist-as-supreme-individual, i.e. everyone’s personal style is sacred and the best thing one’s art can be is elaborately unique and one’s own. On the other hand, the institutions for which all this hyper-unique art is manufactured are militantly conformist and narrowly ideological about just *how* that individualism gets expressed, whether because of the profit motive’s strictures (in the case of commercial galleries) or the professional elite’s careerism and “radical” liberalism (in the case of the whole range of museums and museum-like things). This obvious double-bind disinclines academic institutions to take ideological stances about how art should be made — which of course is an idiotic thing to do except when you have to go and make a work of art — and has them instead training students less to be artists than to operate deftly as autonomist producers of culture-objects within a bogglingly the complex social system of Contemporary Art, which requires good artists more so than good art. It’s Alexandrian professional development, which is fine for accountants but not so great vis-à-vis facilitating people’s profound experiences.

So anyway, *Slingshot*. Lynne Smith's contribution is way good. It's a floor-to-ceiling sort-of-steel beam painted the same color as the gallery, plus a little bent-up paperclip sticking out of the wall next to it with a piece of string hanging off. The big/small thing it's doing is phenomenal, plus I choose to read its different kinds of vanishing (going on amidst a bunch of work that definitely does not vanish) as some sort of fuck-you to the situation I just described. Mad Green made a boxing ring that I don't much like as art, but it's got pencil drawings on each of its four corner-beams that are half-assed and jittery and pretty great. Jordan Geiger's sewn piece is exquisitely well made.

—T.S.

Monaco

Every Shiny Thing

June 28-July 26



Installation view of works by Morgan Rose Free (foreground) and Samantha Sanders (background), from *Every Shiny Thing*. Photo by Troy Sherman.

I'm not sure that, discretely, any of the artworks in this show are exceptional, besides some of Sarah Knight's ceramics. But art doesn't work discretely. We experience every artwork as a node within networks of thoughts, things, and other artworks; this is why we need curators.

Every Shiny Thing is expertly curated, in terms of both the selection of works and their arrangement. The ample space between Samantha Sanders's petite drawings, sparsely and irregularly hung across each of Monaco's three walls, projects out into the gallery's third dimension, where it's punctuated all over by an archipelago of floor-bound sculptures and black piles of sand. This results in a cohesion that's tough to achieve in such a small space with such a disparate range of artworks. And by cohesion, I mean a spatial purposefulness that contributes to a conceptual order, and vice versa. The proximity of Sanders's storybook entomological studies to Morgan Rose Free's centipede sculptures isn't trite at all, but only because the soft rendering and smallness of the one sets off the curvatures of the other, which itself goes on to implicate the rest of the show's sinuous spatial relations.

In part, Knight’s ceramics are so good in this context because they’re porous materially and enfolded structurally. Their porosity acts like an extension of the exhibition’s overall commitment to levity and openness, while the sense of inward movement they convey (created by thickly overlapping and intersecting planes) cuts them off from their surroundings and compels you to view them as individual objects. In this way, they are microcosms of the whole show.

—T.S.

NON STNDRD

Assaf Evron: Snake in the Grass

April 6-June 1



Installation view of *Assaf Evron: Snake in the Grass*. Photo courtesy of the artist

Only serious artists are influenced by Albrecht Dürer’s print *Melencolia I*. Evron emphasized its so-called “failed rationality” by incorporating discarded architectural relics into his sculptures, hearkening back to a 2000s sensibility that free-associated found objects in an attempt at sculptural poetry. A green marble slab lay on the floor with a zigzagged broomstick atop, broken, perhaps to evoke the enlightenment’s radically disenchanting spirit, wherein no magic thrives without first being tortured by experiments and analysis. Elsewhere, plaster eyes gazed at their viewers from all directions, analyzing *them*. The result was that, looked at, one had a more acute awareness of one’s own looking habits, and was forced to confront the conflicting meanings of self-consciousness that define life in our era.

Lesser art tends to evade this problem via entertainment. The meaning of Dürer’s study, however, is not so much a negation of reason (as postmodern and contemporary ideologies suppose, and which Evron’s work echoes) so much as it is a challenge to reason by revealing how it has its own curious aesthetic life. Aesthetics is perennially bound up with reason, because reason ultimately became about appearances, which is art’s domain. Try as some might, the two cannot be separated in our society. As Adorno said, “society is not just mad, but mad *and* rational.”

—B.S.

NON STNDRD

Claire Ashley: *Radiant Pearl*

April 6-June 1



Installation view of *Claire Ashley: Radiant Pearl*. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Ashley posed a Contemporary Art ship-in-a-bottle conundrum. A giant bubble filled the room and contained two amorphous rainbow inflatables; a *musique concrète* soundtrack helped viewers feel as if they were on another planet. It was playful, but its kitschy theatricality meant that viewers were more entertained than reflective of their experience or perception.

Like much of Contemporary Art's cheap entertainment style, Ashley's installation seemed designed to have a strong initial impact, but despite its fun affectations was actually academic, lacking intellectual originality or emotional stimulation. Like a Meow Wolf installation, Ashley's kitsch was in part due to the coarseness of its rainbow coloring, which lacked a refinement of specific color relations, and to the soggy-biscuit sound-effects mush, which seemed unbaked and so somewhat superfluous.

One of the most interesting things about sculpture in general is that it must confront gravity — the problem of how to make something stand up autonomously is a basic part of sculpture's form and its appeals to our material suffering. The generic ties holding down Ashley's bubble seemed perfunctory, and were a missed opportunity to deal with this essential problem of her medium. Perhaps her inflatables, standing on their own (literally and metaphorically), would have been able to float more freely in our imaginations.

—B.S.

NON STNDRD

Key Loop

June 22-August 17



Installation view of (left to right) works by Nick Larsen, Craig Hartenberger, Emily Mueller, and kg, from *Key Loop*. Photo by Troy Sherman

The conception for *Key Loop* — it’s about patterning and change — is thankfully not super academic, but it seems to only have to do with the artworks, like, 65%. The inclusions are for the most part competent crafty things that struggle to contend with how fucking cool and beautiful NON STNDRD (a rehabbed decrepit industrial building) physically is. The exhibition seems to indicate the trouble with organizing a group show in a space that emphasizes the ways in which installation and atmosphere are unavoidable aspects of the ways artworks function.

Curators are constructors of artistic meaning via selection and arrangement. They can repress this fact for the sake of the valuable illusion of artistic autonomy (as happens with, say, museum shows of old paintings) or they can sidestep it by vesting artists with total control (as is the case with installation art). What’s bolder is committing to curatorial absolutism at the expense of intentionality: “drawing” in gallery-space using other people’s art as your pen, to hell with what the artists meant. NON STNDRD’s galleries so fully — almost domineeringly — decontextualize the artworks that are in them as seemingly to require full-bore curatorial reconstruction of this sort. But again, that’s only 65% what we get with *Key Loop*, which is sensitively arranged but a little disparate, and lacks a sense of itself as a totality.

Artwork to artwork, the stuff in this show is mostly not bad. Rashawn Griffin’s little ceramic piece isn’t precise enough to be so humble, and Katie Ford’s tenuous wall sculptures relish their sparseness and randomness a bit too heartily, but Anna Schenker’s big banners are certainly well drawn and smartly installed, and Craig Hartenberger’s patterns are right for the shapes he conceives to convey them. The most successful single piece is Emily Mueller’s *The Neutral*, a big, painstaking, subtly graded squiggle drawing that’s just sculptural enough to remind you that it’s in a real space, but just enough of an image to not get swallowed up by its surroundings.

—T.S.

Saint Louis Art Museum
Currents 123: Tamara Johnson
April 5-September 22



Installation view of *Currents 123: Tamara Johnson*. Photo by Troy Sherman.

It's hard to write aesthetically-grounded criticism about art that is this cerebral. It feels like a thesis, a thinkpiece launch pad. I could (and the curator did) write a good bit about the "conceptual" in this conceptual art and chin-stroke about the aesthetic durability (or lack thereof) of consumer life.

But what of the aesthetic experience, the *art* part? Johnson's installation is an assemblage, seemingly of found commercial detritus. At first, you think: is that Duchamp's Babybel mesh? Did they forget to take that blue tape off the wall after setting up?

Upon closer examination, everything's revealed to be a durable sculpture: American cheese squares of rubber and acrylic, a cast-pewter and varnished "plastic" chair. And amidst these disposables-made-concrete (literally, in the case of the waffle cones), there are disruptors: a human finger hangs on a keychain, a plastic ballerina spins in a misshapen colander. An actual Ammonite fossil attempts to bring weight, literal and metaphorical.

The copper sheen of the cascading ropes of tickets (think school raffle or arcade currency) imbues them with the value that a child sees in them. "The golden ticket!" a Wonka fan commented while I was viewing the show. The tickets play well with the concrete beams in the gallery's ceiling, and the sweet memories they conjure loom over the rest of the exhibition. This is why there is promise in playing with mundane objects! But beyond that, there isn't much to directly experience here — it's all just for exegesis.

Tucked far away from this assemblage is a 13-minute video essay that uses the author's vertigo as a jumping-off point for free-associatively exploring the idea of "spinning bodies." There are a handful of great images here, particularly of tornadoes, and Johnson weaves some of the disruptive sculptures into the video. The narration helps it hold your attention more than most museum video art, but it's not

quite coherent enough to justify the title of “video essay,” so it feels like it’s stuck in limbo.

—B.Z.

Saint Louis Art Museum

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith

May 3–November 10



Installation view of *Jaune Quick-to-See Smith*. Photo by Troy Sherman.

Though its intentions are admirable, this half-century-spanning smattering of works by Smith is unfortunately more of a history lecture than it is an art exhibition. If that’s what one wants from their visit to SLAM’s galleries, I’m sure they’ll enjoy the set-up just fine.

This isn’t to say that Smith is not adept, even occasionally good: her work can be fascinating and beautiful. Her recontextualized United States map paintings, for instance, are sometimes stimulating, typically more so the more genuinely abstract they are. The example on view here, called *State Names Map: Cabokia*, is, however, so on-the-nose as to feel almost inartistic. It’s paired with *Trade Canoe: Cabokia*, a woven canoe sculpture filled with cast-resin, paint-dripped objects like mirrors, guns, and liquor. All of this is Contemporary Art cliché: the lovely canoe might have spoken for itself, but with its plastic-toy-looking conceptual objects it becomes essentially a dull piece of prose. (Both painting and canoe were presented last summer at Monaco as part of the Counterpublic triennial.)

Thankfully, there are some genuinely interesting drawings along the gallery’s left wall. Through their vague gestures and solid shapes and little animal half-sketches, the viewer gets to see a kind of proto-version of what happens when Smith unleashes her full intellect and instincts as an artist. When she does, she clearly has things to show us that are more complex and challenging than her Contemporary Art statements.

—S.J.

Saint Louis Art Museum

Native American Art of the 20th Century: The William P. Healey Collection

February 17-July 14



Installation view of *Native American Art of the 20th Century: The William P. Healey Collection*. The painting at right is Fritz Scholder's *Indian with Tomahawk*. Photo by Troy Sherman.

SLAM's collections of Native North American arts are so copious that they occupy distinct galleries on three floors. Archaeologically-recovered works reside in the lower level; a constellation of 19th- and 20th-century works, from cultures across our nation, richly fill the second floor's Danforth Gallery; and on the main floor, we encounter compelling recent works by artists such as Edgar Heap-of-Birds (Cheyenne and Arapaho Nations) and Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes). Together, these constitute a formidable strength in Native American visual arts — but a key chapter of this narrative has been missing.

This exhibition introduces a transformative promised gift of 100 paintings and sculptures from collector William P. Healey. What has long been missing in a St. Louis public collection is this significant episode of Indigenous modernism after 1920, undertaken by artists who forged a new path that both embraced their specific cultural heritages, but also pushed into new and distinctive modern idioms.

The first of two galleries boasts walls densely hung with a broad range of works that speak to remembered and envisioned cultural practices. Their visual idiom is flat and hieratic in style; the subjects range from the observed to the visionary. The second gallery offers a burst of color and diversity in media, size, and style. The room is anchored by *Ephemeration* (1962), an intense abstract painting by George Morrison (Anishinaabe-Ojibwe) in which swaths of blue, salmon, rose, and green are disrupted by a feverishly worked surface — gnarled, layered, and clotted to produce an effect that, to use Morrison's own term, is "magical."

In contrast to such bold abstraction, a great variety of figures and faces assert themselves on the surrounding walls. These are overshadowed by the grand life-size figure in *Indian with Tomahawk* (1972), a painting by Fritz Scholder (Luiseño). This boldly painted figure subverts stereotype and anecdote, leaving one acutely aware of

an artistic voice able to question and to dominate the visual conversations both in and out of the room.

—E.C.C.

Saint Louis Art Museum

Romare Bearden: Resonances

May 3-September 15



Installation view of *Romare Bearden: Resonances*, with Bearden's *Summertime* at left.
Photo by Troy Sherman.

This small exhibition is dedicated to the African American cartoonist-turned-artist Romare Bearden. It includes more works by artists with whom Bearden was associated than works by Bearden himself. Most of the non-Bearden works are forgettable.

The show's clear centerpiece, Bearden's own *Summertime* from 1967, is absolutely worth any viewer's time. Part collage, it has a great deal of life and color — I hear jazz coming out of it, really. Something about the piece feels peculiar and right. It draws the eye.

You see a surface made of chips and pieces: an uglified mosaic, but ugly as in interesting. A very pretty ugliness coming out of New York — the genuine American city — with little leitmotifs of characters and silhouettes, noise, things crashing into each other. One wants neither more nor less color from it. Then, the surface deepens — you sense the space of the city's alleys, stairs, and stoops. It's a remarkable evocation.

—S.J.

Wildfruit Projects

De'Joneiro Jones: New Capit@l

April 6-May 4



Installation view of *De'Joneiro Jones: New Capit@l*. Photo courtesy of Wildfruit Projects.

Jones's show spanned two galleries. He is a prolific painter, and that's a good thing. His paintings were abstract, mostly in a kind of well-trod "zombie formalist" vein, but they all tended to be rather different from each other. One triangular canvas was splashed with Pollock-like lines, for instance, while an adjacent painting had seemingly random objects hanging off it; its verso was a painted stop sign. Contrary to the slapstick gestures of many canvases like these was a wall of tapestry-like color patchworks, more constrained and constructed than freely gestural. Some of the paintings contained texts that said things like, "Life." Such affectations came off as high-class graffiti.

With so much going on, perhaps the most successful pieces were the simplest: a vast splash of black on a yellow background that contained a few colorful circles conjured some of abstract expressionism's canvases (Motherwell's, Gottlieb's), as well as some kind of strange cosmic egg. One painting was so daringly simple that the artist almost seemed ashamed, installing it in a darkened back corner. This hazy orange cloud on mint green paper was nevertheless highly effective in its poetic candor and sensitivity to color, which many of the bombastic painting-reliefs lacked.

When painters hang objects off their canvases to "subvert" the picture plane, the result is often a boring evasion of the problems inherent to painting, of which there are many. In painting, each problem is a unique opportunity; if a painter can't bother to confront the primary one — the finitude of the picture plane — they are probably not rising to the medium's challenge. Even so, Jones is very dynamic and prolific, and prolific artists often tend to do interesting things ultimately, as they metabolize many different artistic ideas. While most of this show's paintings were fine, not excellent, Jones may one day do something truly unique.

—B.S.

Abdallah Ibn al-Fadl. *Doctors Preparing Burnt Copper* (folio from an illustrated manuscript of Dioscorides' *De materia medica*). Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper. 1224

On view at the Saint Louis Art Museum



Detail of *Doctors Preparing Burnt Copper*, an illumination by Abdallah Ibn al-Fadl.
Photo by Troy Sherman.

This page comes from an Arabic manuscript of *De materia medica*, a first-century Greco-Roman tract that set the foundation for Western medicine's understanding of medicinal plants. As someone who long behaved as though art history starts with Impressionism, what resonates with me about illuminations like this is their simultaneous familiarity and distance: the modernistically flat, cartoonish depictions of utterly foreign past realities.

Picasso has a famous series of drawings demonstrating how to depict a bull with as few lines as possible. He starts with a detailed, shaded drawing and removes details step-by-step until we're left with a curvy trapezoid with limbs and horns that is still, unmistakably, a bull. The illustrators here were engaged in a similar distillation, though maybe this was driven more by actual economics than aesthetic desires. They were painting with literal gold, after all.

Look at the imbalanced lobster claw hands! The leftmost eye, just two strokes, no circle. The texture of their headcovers: layers of folds up top and the swishing tail down their backs. Much of this feels like the work of a 20th century artist: it's an evocation of known images through non-naturalistic means.

But then we get back to the strangeness. Who are these men and why are they burning copper? Why do they have haloes? Why depict the scene so it looks like one man's legs are being flayed? What's that spectral vase on the right doing here? Where did all these blue flecks come from? This is the fun tension at the heart of our experience of any artwork that is so historically distant: artists just like us using economical gestures to conjure a world nothing like our own.

—B.Z.

Patterhn Ives, Arbolope Studio, and the community of Cherokee Street. *Love Bank Park*. 2015-2024.

Northeast corner of Nebraska Street and Cherokee Street



View of Love Bank Park. Photo by Ellen Curry.

Cherokee Street remains a beguiling commercial strip. Over 20 blocks of densely built vernacular urbanism run from Broadway to Gravois, surrounded on some sides by the city's most densely populated neighborhood (Gravois Park). Thus, the street should be a regional *agora* teeming with pedestrians and useful commercial and social functions — and as recently as the late nineties, it was. Today, it seems perpetually stuck between stations, with the practical (so many barber shops!), the idealistic (mid-century modern furniture stores with Clayton prices), the anchored (Mexican businesses in self-owned buildings; Mud House) and the stagnant (many overpriced storefronts owned by the less benevolent of the street's two mega-landlords).

Love Bank Park has been a welcome resolution of many of the problems that beset this street where human density and actual function remain mismatched. When the necessary demolition of a condemned corner commercial building opened up access to a paved in-between space, the community worked to transform the lot into a potentially liminal basketball court. The raw court and the foot-trodden vacant lot where the building stood have thrived informally for a decade.

The rebuilding of Love Bank Park, funded by the Cherokee Community Improvement District, could have resulted in a static, fancy, off-putting replacement. Instead, the design — with built forms from Patterhn Ives and a landscape from Arbolope Studio — is spot on. The formalization of the basketball court includes a hardscape plaza where ecological vitality (plants, trees) does not overwhelm social use, as is often the case with so many landscape designs today. The tubular and gridded metal structure suggests enclosure, which is a great change on one of Cherokee's few formless corners. Since opening in April, the court has been packed — but the plaza with its tables and seating has added a new layer of users. Perhaps the rest of Cherokee Street can learn.

—M.R.A.

Thomas Sleet. *River Ark*. Driftwood, charring, mirrored glass. 2022.

On view at the Audubon Center at Riverlands



Installation view of *River Ark*. Photo courtesy of the Audubon Center at Riverlands.

If you visit the Audubon Center at Riverlands, you'll be able to see a true work of land art worthy of Smithson, Holt, et al. While Contemporary earthworks are often ironic or corny gimmicks, Sleet's *River Ark* is sincere about form and sensitive to landscape. Utilizing found driftwood posts — charred black and minimally arranged in two ascending (or descending) rows that jut straight into the sky — Sleet elegantly plays with our perception of sightlines. He is aesthetically intelligent enough to have kept the form simple, which allows viewers an acute awareness of scale, site, and gravity as they playfully traverse the open sculpture.

When I went, a bird was making its nest in the tallest post. While naturalists will swoon over an artwork that is part of nature in such a way, the artist's mind will appreciate how, in fact, it is nature that becomes part of the artwork. Like a cigarette butt caught in the eternity of Pollock's paintings, or real life humans recast in Dante's heaven, nature is not here affirmed, but keenly articulated and given a chance to be seen in the redeeming light of aesthetic reflection. Sleet has given form to the terrible formlessness of nature, and in turn, nature thanks him for it. This is an original and masterful artwork to which everyone in St. Louis should make a pilgrimage.

—B.S.

Kehinde Wiley. *Charles I*. Oil on linen. 2018.

On view at the Saint Louis Art Museum



Installation view of Daniel Mytens I's and Kehinde Wiley's *Charles I* paintings.
Photo by Troy Sherman.

While I understand SLAM's motivation for hanging Wiley's *Charles I* among the old masters, I still find it patronizing, almost an insult to their visitors' intelligence. No person waltzing past these old Dutch paintings is unaware that black figures are absent from their frames. In fact, it would be tough to find many museumgoers who think that what the Dutch were up to around 1600 is all that relevant to America in 2024. What, then, is Wiley's florid, repurposing kiss-off doing here?

Turn from Wiley's portrait to the original *Charles I* it's juxtaposed with (done by Daniel Mytens I in 1633). Any 21st-century person will immediately find the older work's opulent, curlicued gold frame pompous, maybe even ridiculous. The king himself is merely another king; he means nothing to us. But turn further and discover gloomy still lives; poor musicians begging in doorways; dark, somber, Northern pictures of ice skaters and old mothers. The 21st century simply does not belong in this room. It's a desperate failure of aesthetic thought to attempt to pierce the fullness of our contemplation of a different era.

The beauty of a gallery like this one is not that we can bring our own century (and its contents and its needs) into it, like some rude guest. The beauty is that we leave our own world behind us and are judged by silent, wordless stations of history. Relevancy isn't a real question — if they don't matter, take these paintings out of the museum entirely. But if they do, let them speak for themselves.

—S.J.

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