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## Five St. Louis Artists at Monaco

by Troy Sherman

Monaco is an artist-owned and -run cooperative gallery in St. Louis, an appendage of the city's marquee amorphous contemporary art institution, The Luminary. Monaco consistently presents the most on-trend art being made in St. Louis. Its five operators are also among the city's best current artists. "Faithfully Askew Too" (FAT), a group exhibition featuring all of them, was a hodgepodge with a number of worthwhile moments. The show started at The Latent Space, a similar gallery in Chicago, and came back to St. Louis for two weeks in late January and early February. The work was uneven, but there were promising elements distinct to each artist's practice. Besides these, FAT is worth spending some time on because it made apparent some issues besetting "regional" artists that are worth making a few explicit points about.



"Faithfully Askew Too" installation view. Courtesy of GoodArt Doc. Photo: Kalaija Mallery.

There is scant unity among the Monaco artists in terms of style, theme, technique, approach, or much of anything else. This amounted in FAT to a dizzying incommensurability between the five separate groups of work that were on display. Such incommensurability is symptomatic of our late-pluralist culture. For decades, artists have been told that collective forms of expression, gotten at through a shared understanding among current artists of art's history and future, are no match for the unique whims of individual makers. In the 2020s, this once-hopeful notion has long since fossilized, and put us in a place that feels unmoored and repetitive. This is by no means unique to Monaco; any similar gallery anywhere in the world, I think, would exhibit the same obstinate individualism among its artists and the same resistance to common forms among its artworks. But the contours of the problem need to be recognized as different for provincial artists than for those who work in art hubs. We will return to this briefly after assessing the work that was on view in FAT.

The best artist of the Monaco bunch is Nick Schleicher. (The others are Kalaija Mallery, Marina May, Emily Mueller, and Edo Rosenblith.) Schleicher makes paintings using a somewhat complicated and very restrictive squeegee-like technique, whereby he applies acrylics and gloss coat-by-coat. The result is layered, random paintings that get at their effects by way of happy accidents which Schleicher seems to do his best to command. The thing he most apparently has under his control is the size and shape of his canvases, which range from stretched-out tombstones to little circles. Occasionally, the paintings are presented in groups. Since Schleicher's method is so formally constraining, the success of his paintings relies on how convincingly they incorporate some registration of this method into the "pictures" they present. In general, his paintings require an element of his technique to be made visually apparent in them, not simply as an objective registration of his process, but as a component of their overall images. In other words, they require go-betweens connecting their literal material presence with their metaphorical dimensions. (In this way, Schleicher's paintings are not different from the post-painterly abstractions from which they derive, though they're often glitzier and even more surface-y than their sixties forebears.) The painting in FAT I most appreciated (Schleicher's *EZ-BB*) accomplished this by means of certain blemishes in its top half and a lethargic creep of pink below them combining to emphasize a hovering, ghostly quality to a set of horizontal streaks that were clearly traces of Schleicher's

squeegee. The rest of his paintings were scintillating, but failed to imbue their rich materiality with much that made its slickness seem comparably significant.

Fans of cool paper would have appreciated the stuff Emily Mueller did her drawings on, which besides being thick and deckled, was shaped and put into custom frames. Mueller's five drawings made one feel that their shapes were at least partially demanded by something intrinsic to them, rather than arbitrarily chosen for effect. This was to their credit, and probably had to do with the way Mueller engaged her paper's deckling compositionally. She colored her borders right into the crannies of the paper's uneven edges, emphasizing the object-quality of her drawings while simultaneously allowing this quality to interact with her designs. This latter dynamic, however, was not given quite enough force, except perhaps in a small yellow and green piece. This left the meat of the compositions underarticulated: Mueller appeared to have rendered her drawings out from their insides, a problem because their in:

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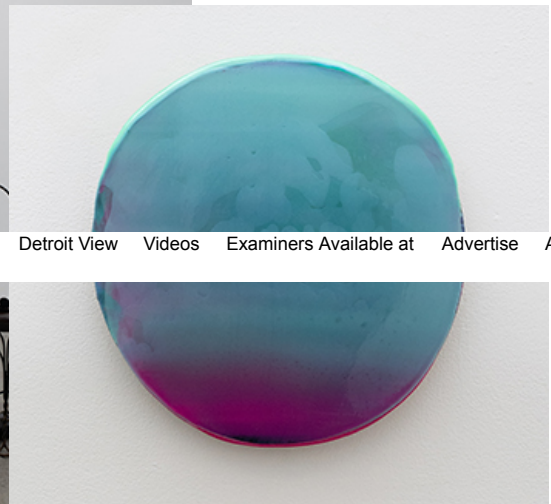
ornament. An indulgence in "mark-makir subordination of each drawing's main figure or figures to the field of dashes within which they were placed. It seemed as though Mueller tried to undercut this subordination by using stronger hues for her figures and weaker ones for her grounds, but it didn't work. Her figures were neither fully convincing as pure pattern nor sufficiently differentiated from the patterned skein in which they were set.



Emily Mueller, *The Board Upon Which I Float*, 2022. Colored pencil on handmade paper. Courtesy of GoodArt Doc. Photo: Kalajaja Mallery.

Edo Rosenblith's paintings suffered from perhaps the opposite problem. Despite the brusqueness and the forwardness of his technique, they were mired too deeply in trying to represent. Rosenblith's style is sort of a neo-expressionist version of R. Crumb's cartoons, and has affinities with both the 70s Bad Painting movement and Chicago Imagism. The latter, especially, came through well in his wont to activate every inch of his pictures, but he seemed to have taken more from the former. This was to his paintings' detriment, particularly in the fourteen inch-square canvases that were most of his contribution to FAT. The elements of facture that contributed to their rough appearance—sloppy lines, untouched passages, the unseemly building up of paint—appeared to have settled on the paintings' surfaces rather than worked their way to the paintings' cores. The style he put forward in *The Ulti-Man Shrugs*, a hard-edged acrylic painting on a shaped panel, was altogether much more promising, but the selection of shape (a retro UFC logo) was a bit arbitrary in relation to the overall design, and the painting's general busyness had to work hard to make up for—and it never really made good on—its facile iconography.

The sole contribution from Marina May to FAT, a text-based piece called *Naked Cake Walk*, gained much from its unpretentiousness. This was surprising and unsurprising in equal measure, given May's status as not really a visual artist: unsurprising because lacking an established practice means lacking an artist's statement to live up to; surprising because one would expect someone who has worked for years in and around contemporary art, as May has, to overburden her first public go at making art with smartness and theory. Instead, *Naked Cake Walk* was a well-written story with personal import delivered plainly, in a pink sans serif script stuck to a dozen mirrors hung in a square. If it didn't make an airtight case for why it had to be visual art and not simply literature, it also didn't make no case at all. There was a definite but ambiguous correspondence between May's story of Midwestern ritual and the walking-around you had to do to read it. And while the implication of the reader within the text accomplished by the mirrors was a little hacky, it was also a little good. Should May decide to continue her foray into making art—which I don't think would be the worst idea—she would do well to tighten up the specifically artistic (rather than literary) elements of her work while continuing not to emphasize them.



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Nick Schleicher, *EZ-BB*, 2022. Acrylic, gel gloss, glazing medium, iridescent pigment, and phosphorescent pigment on linen wrapped paper, 2023. Courtesy of GoodArt Doc. Photo: Kalaija Mallery.

(Left) Marina May, *Naked Cake Walk*, 2022. (Right) Kalaija Mallery, *How to End the End of the World*, 2023. Courtesy of GoodArt Doc. Photos: Kalaija Mallery.

Of everything in FAT, Kalaija Mallery's work left me feeling the most indifferent, but I also have the lingering sense that it was the most advanced on offer. This is to say that her contribution to the show was essentially unrealized. It consisted of a print on silk, two back-to-back chairs with tape recorders beneath them, and a wooden box full of something sooty holding two identical brass vases. Its overall theme was apparently coupling or pairs—the print showed two skeletal lovers entwined and congealing—but it got at this a little too directly. The work felt too beholden to its concept, and would have benefited greatly from more ambiguity, even messiness. What success the work did have derived from the tension between its sparse, even reticent presentation on the one hand, and how overloaded its individual components were with unrequited meaning on the other. Physical messiness, to be sure, would have wrecked this, so what I mean is conceptual messiness. Mallery's light touch with an installation is her strength.

In evaluating their work for this essay, I have had to construct for each Monaco artist a set of bespoke aesthetic criteria, which I hope have accorded with the artists' respective intentions while also remaining consistent with my experience of their work. As I said above, this disparity between their five practices is an expression of the individualism that is the dominant ideology of Contemporary Art. By no means is this state of affairs unique to Monaco or the fault of its artists, though identifying it as such could have particular implications for them, and by extension the artistic ecosystem of St. Louis. It bears pointing out that Midwestern artists are provincial by any standard. There is not the same concentration of creatives or collectors, the same availability of resources, the same heightened interest around visual art in a city like St. Louis as there is elsewhere; these are the things that, by sheer dint of force or inertia, allow hyper-individualist art to go on seeming legitimate. Perhaps the only hope provincial artists have is to lean into their provincialism—or to put it more palatably, to develop a regionalism. If FAT is any indication, there is nothing remotely like a regional style in St. Louis today. But there are artists who, in their solipsism, have developed interesting methods and salable forms. It's not inconceivable that, in some combination, these could provide the foundation for the sort of collective approach to art that could push us beyond senescent pluralism.

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