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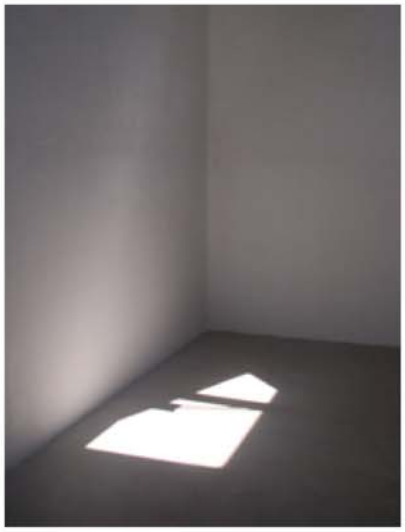
Take shelter

Two area artists intimately inform on stillness, protection, motion and control

BY LYNN CRAWFORD



Casting shadows: A collaboration piece by Michael Smith and Kate Levant, 2007.

Kate Levant and Michael Smith's untitled exhibition of untitled works presents an engaging meditation on movement, stasis, and the ways one informs, even becomes, the other. The pieces — except for one collaboration — are made by the artists individually, but installed together, transforming Ferndale's Susanne Hilberry Gallery into a stage set. Lights are turned off and the works are strategically placed in relation to one another. Their positions articulate something intimate and in-process: lines of dialogue, strains of music, movements in a board game, points of an athletic match, choreographed dance steps. There is a good deal of humor and melancholy to soak up when viewing this show, but you have to be willing to absorb it.

Among Smith's object-based arrangements is a neatly, almost fussily stacked pile of black T-shirts with a hat perched upon it, tipped as if on a head, and two white hats placed nearby (one upside down). Another scene consists of three discrete items: a stainless steel bowl, an object that resembles a car jack and a black cap. In the gallery nook, a black car trunk hood leans against a wall.

Other works, more closely visually interwoven with Levant's, include a basketball on the ground, a ball dangling from a ceiling by a bungee cord and strips of black tape on the walls, perhaps framing a space that could contain an image.

Initially, Smith's scenes of carefully arranged order seem to depict units of protection where one can stay put, even hide out, from the random and the unknown. But when you consider that his choice of objects used to make up his constructions are things that move, or that can be moved (balls are whacked, rolled, tossed; bowls are filled; cars are driven; shirts and hats are worn), you realize that he seems to be poking fun at the notion of protection, or at least the notion of yearning for it. By staging deliberate scenes made up of things meant to be mobile, Smith at once champions an environment of control, and acknowledges it as fantasy.

Also by Smith is a terrific painting, a white canvas with thick, white, crisscross swaths, and vertical, green, yellow and red stripes. At first this appears to be the most conventional piece in the show — until you see Kate Levant's tiny, easy-to-miss plastic sculpture on the floor below it, that looks like a part of a child's K'nex set. The discourse between the pair holds oddly hilarious possibilities: parent, child; high, low; control, robot.

The majority of Levant's works are jaw-droppingly beautiful tapestries tacked on the wall or suspended from the ceiling. Her materials are also used for items of protective covering or as sacks: a bright yellow plastic rain poncho, light blue recycling garbage bags, a blue cotton bedsheet, a thick blanket. Some of her pieces are painted with portrait-referencing images (eyes, mouths, fingers). Others contain different kinds of stitching that function in two ways: The stitching attaches things together and it also makes fascinating patterns. In one light blue ceiling-suspended piece, layers of plastic and a cotton bedsheet are sewn together onto a recycling bag. The proximity to cotton gives the plastic an unexpected texture of fragility. In another piece, a ratty, striped blanket has tiny cloth flowers sewn on its solid colored backside in a way that imbues the stained or worn cover with a stunning sense of adornment and refinery.

Levant plays with motion. Her stitching makes fascinating, roaming patterns, trails and paths. She hangs her pieces on the wall and from the ceiling in a way that emphasizes their billowy quality, suggesting sails, ships and balloons, on the verge of taking off. At the same time, they are visually tethered because her fabrics are functional, used materials.

The show's exploration of stillness versus motion is underscored by the artists' single collaborative piece. Levant and Smith carefully, deliberately, cover the gallery's skylight with pieces of tarp and plastic in a way that casts different shadows and patterns on an area of the gallery throughout the day. In the morning there is a fuzzy, diffuse light on the floor, which moves up the wall and becomes a crisp, triangular shape pointing skyward as the day progresses. In keeping with this exhibition's exploration of things imaginative yet grounded, the light moves up, up, but not away.

Michael Smith and Kate Levant runs through Aug. 10 at Susanne Hilberry Gallery, 700 Livernois St., Ferndale; 248-541-4700.

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