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May 20, 2009

Contemporary Charleston 2009 celebrates local visionaries

All-Star Match

BY **NICK SMITH**

The concept behind *Contemporary Charleston 2009* reflects our society's increasing desire to take a behind-the-scenes look at life. The latest generation understands that to help promote their work, they must be willing to show how they make it.

The City Gallery at Waterfront Park is demonstrating this artistic process in three ways: through a series of talks, which will run on Saturdays after Spoleto's done; through a display of materials or objects that symbolize the artist's methods; and with video documentaries. The aim is to build understanding that the show's artists spent a long time on their pieces and that they are constructed with a high level of creativity.

Dorothy Netherland's been painting on glass for seven years now to increasing critical acclaim. The highlight of her career has been a group show at the Greenville County Museum of Art, but her work here seems more effective and more truthful. It's a series of mother-daughter diptychs that riff on '50s and '60s ads and wallpaper, childhood memories and women's evolving roles in the home. Netherland's figures are muckily colored and sometimes grotesque, but she has powerful things to say about female restriction through fashion, social pressures, and expectations.

Jonathan Brilliant uses materials from his natural habitat — Starbucks — to construct incredibly intricate sculptures. His City Gallery installation is a delicate latticework of stir sticks, all hand woven into undulating patterns that threaten to collapse at the slightest breath. His work connotes Southern basket weaving traditions, finding a fresh angle on a centuries-old craft. He makes a strong ecological comment by using disposable materials to make shapes that reflect our endangered environment, and like Netherland he makes the past relevant for a new, jaded generation.

Karin Olah's inspiration is drawn from quiltmaking. She cuts strips of fabric to resemble brushstrokes and then uses them to depict the architecture, geography, and atmosphere around her — her swirls of color and cloth are an extension of the feeling she gets when she sees sky reflected on water or downtown buildings clustered together.

Cleverly, Olah has taken some of fabric strips and pasted them onto the gallery walls as extensions of her framed art. The strips festoon from some of the pictures like celebratory streamers, encroaching on the space of adjacent artist Ishmael. One wall seems cluttered with lots of Olah's smaller, framed six-inch pieces. A little more white space would give these images room to breathe. And Olah's rough edges won't be for everyone — she chooses to let her fabric edges, graphite outlines, and sticky gouache show. But like Brilliant, she successfully makes an old medium relevant again.

Ishmael blends his street art sensibilities with art show conservatism. His spray paint compositions on epic-sized wooden panels read like a celebration of black and white cinema, including a focal image of Charlie Chaplin with King Kong on the brain. Beyond the cultural references, the artist has been experimenting with burning his spraylines. This has led to a sunray effect, emitted from his characters' minds.

Ben Timpson has perfected a breathtaking photographic style that uses found natural objects as its basis. He creates ballerinas, birds, raffish gentlemen, and distinct landscapes using tiny leaves, insect parts, and plant matter. There's a lot of fun to be had admiring the final products, then trying to figure out what he used to construct them.

Timpson and his co-exhibitors make gorgeous and memorable images with everyday materials and deserve to be encouraged with a large-scale show like this.