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Midwestern Appropriation review at Hyde Park Art Center is appropriating what, specifically?

By Claudine Ise, Special to the Tribune

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Doubled images, double takes, jokes smart and dumb, and a panoply of visual puns animate "A Study in Midwestern Appropriation," a witty, wacky, occasionally perplexing yet persistently engaging group exhibition at the Hyde Park Art Center. It is put together by artist Michelle Grabner, a professor of painting and drawing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the co-curator of the 2014 Whitney Biennial. The show includes about 50 works of art by 40 artists with Midwest ties, all of whom take existing objects, images, texts or ideas and use or remake them in some fashion, a practice art historians and curators term "appropriation." You can also call it borrowing, sampling, quoting, referencing, riffing, mimicking or plain old-fashioned copying.

The bulk of the exhibition occupies two conjoined galleries on the Hyde Park Art Center's upper floor, but a few key works appear in other spots, notably "Hot Dog Man," Tony Tasset's dyspepsia-inducing monument to the Chicago-style red hot,//// found on the upper catwalk's north side, and Kevin Maginnis's "Stair Flight Double," an uncanny replica of the black minimalist staircase in the center's lobby. Good thing there's a stanchion in front of Maginnis' piece. It looks stable enough to climb but incredibly, the thing is made entirely out of painted foam core.

Clinging to a wall at the exhibition's west gallery entrance is a giant sculpture in the shape of a horseshoe magnet by Matt Nichols and Oli Watt – Watt, it should be noted, also has a disarming solo show in the long hallway outside. The magnet looms near Nichols' vertical white sculpture, which would be utterly generic if not for the marks and fingerprints the artist left on them. Next to it is artist/rapper/parodist Beverly Fre\$h's "!HECKYEAH!" – a grotesque, grinning hunk of oak carved with a chain saw into a figure I can only describe as a malformed Mr. Potato Head – in other words, doubly mutant. Behind him is John

Riepenhoff's "Art Stand," a startlingly lifelike pair of legs whose torso and head appear to be hidden by a large wooden hot dog sign.

In the context of this show, at least, Fre\$h and Riepenhoff's works, along with Tasset's vulgar, virtuoso "Hot Dog Man," appear to salute Chicago's trend-bucking Imagists and the related Hairy Who group as well as the Hyde Park Art Center itself, which was where, in the late 1960s and at a previous location, the Hairy Who artists coalesced under curator Don Baum's wing. Another tribute is Paul Druecke's installation "The Hairy Who Memorial Library," located in a screening room down the hall and filled with books, photocopies and ephemera relating to the Hairy Who legacy, much of it contributed by the exhibition's artists.

Elsewhere, mischievous doubling abounds. Chris Bradley created a shield made of concrete but which has been expertly painted to resemble a banged-up piece of corrugated cardboard covered with packing tape. Charmingly, the artist added round eyeholes and rectangular finger slots to it. Conversely, Matthew Metzger's row of acrylic and oil paintings on MDF panel fool the eye into thinking they're rust-specked metal sheets. A vitrine holds a handful of Scott Wolniak's humble peanuts, each true-to-size legume cast in Hydrocal, while a weed sprouting from the floor is in fact a painted bronze sculpture by Tony Matelli. Not far away is Matt McAuliffe's "Untitled (dowsing rod)," a Y-shaped tree branch resting against a wall. In this case, the branch really is a branch, even if the rod's divining powers remain dubious.

Other artists transplant pop culture imagery into contemporary art settings, a strategy that sure ain't new but still occasionally beguiles, as with Ben Stone's colorful anime-style sculptural replica of the evil trio Team Rocket from the "Pokemon" universe, or Andrew Falkowski's blue-toned, Warholesque double Napoleons, the latter images nabbed from YouTube screen shots of Hollywood movies.

The works by Stone, Falkowski and Wolniak are hung on or installed directly in front of a wall with a large gray rectangle painted on it. Its color led me to assume that the wall was in fact a Gaylen Gerber piece. Gerber is an esteemed Chicago artist who's known for blurring lines between art-making and curating, especially through his

gray monochrome "backdrops," which serve as grounds for other artists' artworks. The joke was on me: Gerber's work is not in the exhibition. Still, I can't help but wonder if Grabner used this color intentionally in tongue-in-cheek homage to her School of the Art Institute of Chicago colleague.

Not everything on view is based on mimicry. A provocative variant is the installation by the artist/critic Pedro Velez working with Shelleen Greene and Sara Daleiden. "MKE: Marginality, Humor, Poopy Painters, White Privilege, and the Mainstream Art Press" critiques the major national art news outlets for willfully ignoring significant art movements and newsworthy events that occur in the vast expanse between the coasts. Velez makes the point in part by appropriating a series of email exchanges between himself and an editor, who politely but consistently rejects Velez's requests to cover Milwaukee cultural events.

Midwestern artists may have gotten used to being sidelined, but that hasn't crippled their ambition. You can see it in Velez's efforts to put Milwaukee on the art map, and in the exquisite craftsmanship artists like Conrad Bakker employ in their re-creations of "throwaway" items (see Bakker's fastidiously carved wooden copy of a Black & Decker "Workmate" bench, complete with empty yogurt container, for proof). It's there in Karen Reimer's philosophically minded embroidered pillowcases, too. "Heady" in more ways than one, each piece muses on hierarchies of art, craft, and decor and contains quotations from a book by the Romantic poet William Blake.

As it stands, "A Study in Midwestern Appropriation" really is just a study, a compilation of visual notes in the form of artworks. Without a grouping of works by non-Midwesterners to contemplate in tandem, it's hard to determine what the salient qualities of "Midwestern Appropriation" actually are. Humor, dedication, ambition, self-deprecation, collegiality – certainly, all are there. I'm just not sure they're absent elsewhere. Until the show's catalog and accompanying essay by Grabner are published sometime in 2014, we'll have to draw our own conclusions. Heck, I can wait. I live in the Midwest, not New York. I'm not so pressed for time.

"A Study in Midwestern Appropriation" runs through Jan.12 at the Hyde Park Art Center, 5020 S. Cornell Ave., 773-324-

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