

PECK SCHOOL OF
THE ARTS Institute of Visual Arts (Inova)

SURFACE SUBLIME

February 3-March 5, 2006



Opening reception: February 3, 6:00-9:00 pm
Gallery talk with guest curator Nicholas Frank begins at 6:30 pm

Inova Gallery One
Vogel Hall, 3253 N. Downer Ave., Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53211
Hours: Wednesday-Sunday, 12 noon-5 pm

arts.uwm.edu/inova

SURFACE SUBLIME

THE PAGES OF A BOOK CAN'T SEE THEIR COVER

by Nicholas Frank

Language is in a constant process of evolution. The meanings of words shift and change over time, sometimes even coming to mean their opposites. To William Blake, the word 'awesome' would have meant something far different from "way cool, dude." Likewise, the word 'terrible' was once employed not for headaches but to describe tyrants who would end the lives of thousands without a pang of conscience. We've come to rely on modifiers to make what was once simply 'despicable' truly despicable. With the diffusion and dilution of these meanings, we have lost the ability to adequately describe the truly incredible, the deeply disturbing, and the utterly sublime experiences of our times.

As a medium of expression, art has suffered a similar fate. Paintings once depicted the awesome power of gods and ancient heroes, but today the far more visceral media of television and film work the wonder of making the unreal seem real. Images come at us rather than us to them; IMAX movies can churn the stomach nearly as effectively as a roller coaster. But more may be going on beneath the surface of quiet, still objects than people are able to see easily, accustomed as they are to vivid images of explosions, mass death, and the unknowable phenomena of the cosmos.

Rick Pflieger's small sculptures were once dismissed by an arts granting board as contentless examples of basic industrial design. While these sculptures are resolute in their highly reflective, auto-paint clearcoated curves and angles, the grantors failed to consider why these pieces might have been so painstakingly constructed and finished by the artist. Sure, some artwork can be stubborn, but sometimes it must be in order to give the viewer enough of a pause for deeper considerations to kick in. The sculptures aren't clear. They aren't meant to be. But a patient and considerate viewer might notice something at least vaguely mandibular about them, their sizes and shapes conform to the curves and lines of the human head. The titles reveal an emotional content far removed from the calculated world of industrial design; these pieces are all made "For You" or "With You" or in "Appreciation of You," the "you" in each case is someone we can only guess at but is obviously someone important to the artist. The emotion in Pflieger's art is not immediately visible in the surfaces of his works because people are their subject, and people are mysterious.

Like Pflieger's sculptures, Stephen Hough's plastic paintings present hard, shiny surfaces. Viewers are as likely to be drawn into illusionistic depths afforded by the carved ripples and "ChromaLusion" auto paint as to be bothered by their own reflections in the glossy clearcoat. This relationship between reality and irreality is deliberate. Hough's simulated sublime will not allow a viewer to rest with the notion that these are simple representations of natural phenomena; his light is cathode-ray artificial, and the bubbles on his surfaces will not break so easily as those fragile ones afloat on the surface of real water. Narcissus had a similar problem with his silvery-surfaced pond; he couldn't tell what part of love was real and what was imagined.

Both Yumi Janairo Roth and Stan Shellabarger see common daily experiences and repetitions as entryways into existential considerations. Roth's playful approach exaggerates commercial attempts to make the mundane meaningful, as in her "Livingware" floor sculpture of 2001, a compendium of large-scale reproductions of the floral designs on Corelleware dishes. The circular, dish-shaped arrangement of the pieces encloses only a vacuous feast. Shellabarger also examines the deeper meanings of the quotidian, but through the medium of his own body. His walking platforms record the faint traces of his steps,

sandpaper on his shoes to assist in wearing away the surface coats of acrylic paint. Underlayers are revealed gradually through the same kind of repetition anyone who walks performs daily, one foot in front of the other, to where, nobody knows.

Natural elements find their own way into the paintings of Carianne Mack and Gregg Perkins. Taken with phenomena such as frost patterns and tree shadows, Mack brings these images to the surfaces of her canvases. Some painters represent landscape, but Mack wants to see the nature in her paint. Perkins hangs panels in his studio and paints the angled blocks of sunlight that fall upon them at certain times of day. According to Perkins, the moment the panels are moved they are changed forever. The works lose their specific reference, but gain resonance as representations of universal time.

These solid, slick, stubborn surfaces belie complexities that lie beneath, layers of meaning not meant for words, or for easy examination. In the words of William Blake ("The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," 1790):

The head Sublime, the heart Pathos, the genitals Beauty,
the hands and feet Proportion.

But how complex is the head! The term 'sublime' encompasses ideas that are beyond fathoming, eternal things, things too terrible, vast, abyssal, or cosmic in scale to be contemplated by our mere mortal brains. Humanity stands in awe at the wonders of nature, creates and examines byzantine systems of exploration to make sense of life in the individual sense and in our billions. Likewise, the word 'subliminal' refers to things at work beneath the surface of the mind, which has no literal, material surface. The hard, shiny, thick and mirror-like surfaces of the artwork in *Surface Sublime* offer a reflection of the person looking into them. What is seen there is a vision of the sublime; perhaps our inner lives are what is truly beyond comprehension.

About the Curator

An artist and writer, Nicholas Frank directed the Hermetic Gallery in Milwaukee from 1994 through 2001. Since then, he has curated shows independently for the Foster Gallery at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, the General Store and the Jody Monroe Gallery in Milwaukee and the Pond at the Stray Show in Chicago. Throughout, Frank has engaged artists and the public in dialogue, through workshops, critiques, symposia, lectures, art criticism, newsletter editing, forums, panel discussions and a radio show about visual art for Wisconsin Public Radio.

The Institute Of Visual Arts

Since 1996, the Institute of Visual Arts (Inova) at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee has established an international reputation as a contemporary art research center. The mission of the Institute of Visual Arts is to engage the general and university publics with contemporary art from around the world through exhibitions and programs. The Institute is recognized for the high quality of its programs and for the opportunity it offers artists to experiment in the creation of new work.

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Gregg PERKINS
Rick PFLIEGER
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