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It's Personal

Pulp gallery features 'Bill Hoover, New Work,' his first solo show

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Artist Bill Hoover's opening at the Pulp gallery in Benson last weekend was so anticipated and well-received that it may come as a surprise to many that officially this is his first major solo show.

A surprise because Hoover's work has been featured in several group shows in the past few years including those in collaboration with his former creative partner of 14 years, Renee Ledesma Hoover, also an accomplished artist. And, since their split, Bill has had two or three successful "shows" out of his studio

apartment, cleaning house as it were.

Hoover's work, both as musician and visual artist, has always been popular as "many of my paintings and songs have roots in folk storytelling" as he puts it. His paintings and drawings are also rooted in modernist influence, such as Picasso, Miro, Pollock as well as Wilfredo Lam, Diego Rivera and even Basquiat, which viewers find both familiar and interesting as interpreted by this self-taught artist.

Which is why Pulp owner Brigitte McQueen and collaborators Joey Lynch and Jim Sealy felt it was time for Hoover to come out on his own and put together a strong, edgier show of his recent work that reflects both the artist's stylistic variations and his current state of mind. The title "Bill Hoover, New Work" is professional but not particularly profound as it gives little hint at the content and inspiration inherent in the 15 charcoal, acrylic and oils on paper and wood in the show.

A more apt title might be found in the exhibit's signature piece, "The Rooms I've Walked Into," a large work described below which sums up much of what Hoover says motivated him to begin with. "All the work has been influenced by the wrenching events of this year, on a personal level," he said. "But, Renee and I have discovered the solace of art and work, keeping busy. Renee discovered she has an enormous talent in ceramics, and I've been working on a daily basis, getting up at five or so. My apartment is covered with art, drawing, paintings, ceramic and paper mache animals which cover nearly every inch of wall space. It's very comforting."

Although this "New Work" is more personal, as Hoover tends to wear his heart on his sleeve, don't expect him to be airing dirty linen. In fact, while its back-story may interest some more than others, as it does inform the work, it is not a prerequisite for enjoying the artist's command of mark making, composition and colorful narration. A few pieces do depict simple domestic tranquility, at least at first glance, and others, overt emotional rancor, while some are more metaphoric and cryptic.

Overall, "New Work" continues Hoover's multi-faceted approach to his material, which matches well various styles with many mood swings. Yet one tone and point of view persists. In the past much of his work was created from the third person inspired as much by his travels to Mexico and its culture as by his imagination. This work is more internalized and subjective as he is both character and creator. "It's as if this body of work was done from a hiding place," Hoover said, "which is where you go during a hard time."

One such "hiding place" is the indicated "Rooms I've Walked Into," an oil on wood montage of 24 smaller domestic narratives, each a product of Hoover's keen observation, vivid imagination and perhaps, selective memory. It's a scenario straight out of Hitchcock's "Rear Window," an apt title as well, as the artist is no doubt "looking back" at past experiences of what he calls "a scene with maybe sex, or a fight, or a dinner, hanging a painting or taking a bath."

Content aside, this monumental example of Hoover hindsight can be enjoyed as an agreeable pastiche of his stylistic influences that vary from the na'ive to the expressive to the surreal. Each panel is a minimal graphic illustration complete with stick figures, spare setting and unique mood and suitable color scheme. Several of these scenes would do well on their own as they run an emotional gamut from love and bliss to sorrow and despair. Overall, "Rooms" excels as visual journaling, giving credence to the axiom that pictures are often worth a 1000 words.

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Not all of the work in this show is autobiographical. Several pieces contain familiar Hoover themes and motifs in subtler ways. For instance, consider his charcoal on paper "The Tortilla Makers" and his oil on wood "Three Sisters Consoling" each continuing the artist's love of indigenous cultures and a simpler way of life grounded in nature and family.

Each of the above reflects the work of Mexican master Diego Rivera with their flat, two-dimensional surfaces and simple palette. But Hoover eschews Rivera's social realism and emphasizes instead domestic and religious themes, which carry over into his other work here. The "Tortilla Makers" speaks for itself with its narrative of a family at task in a moment of unity. But "Three Sisters Consoling" is more provocative as it is really two sisters consoling a third in the middle, and judging by the cockeyed Cubist perspective of the consolee and the sister on the right, there is some doubt and misgiving in this communion.

Two additional even more expressive works with religious overtones and titles are "I Would like to Crawl Out of this Gethsemane" and "The Annunciation." Though both pieces are expressionistic, "Gethsemane" more resembles Picasso's "Guernica" with its own more personal collage of an anguished figure gesturing skyward and trying to emerge from a chaos of symbols threatening to engulf him. Though derivative, the work has its own pleasing power, composition and mystery.

There is nothing subtle about "The Annunciation," however, as it evokes the sting and rawness of Basquiat. A couple stand naked before each other, he literally, she figuratively as they bare their souls as well as their wrath. "The Annunciation" is particularly poignant as it is paradoxically made in broad, public daylight witnessed by a bright, blue sky and blooming red flowers oblivious to the plight of mere mortals.

A real departure here is the Miro-influenced "Chairs, Birds, Houses 3" which resembles a cave painting, part scratches, part carvings. This piece is not narrative, but quite random and spontaneous befitting its prosaic title. The repetition and sameness of these objects reinforces a very different tone and POV, at once distant, cold, empty and discarded as if the artist had stacked part of his history on a shelf.

Two of Hoover's most mature and accomplished pieces are conveniently grouped on top of each other, "Afternoon Recess" and "Lori and Chris at Sweet Thyme Farms." These two works best demonstrate not only his contrasting styles but the ability to adapt and interpret these variations to different source material. In "Lori and Chris" Hoover appears to be channeling both Paul Gauguin and Jacob Lawrence as he combines the former's homage to Nature and native culture with the latter's stripped down Cubist style and narrative figures.

But while this beautifully composed oil on wood is personal in an exotic and observational way, "Afternoon Recess" is his most confessional work and arguably his most authentic as well. In this rolling, horizontal collage of paper on wood, school children on a playground are imbedded with rote and repetitious text lessons that read "I am my own best friend" and "I will work on my art every day." To complete the scene, Hoover's imagery reflects his own elementary teaching background with cutout block figures that are naïve and hopeful. It seems fitting that despite his mastery of so many influences, this most personal work in the show is simply the Bill Hoover everyone knows.



Big mural to go up in NoDo

The Omaha Mural Project brings in international muralist Meg Saligman, with support from the Bemis Center and the Peter Kiewit Foundation, who is currently in the early stages of completing the mural "Fertile Ground," located on the side of the Energy System's Building at 13th and Webster streets.

In her mural, the internationally acclaimed Saligman reveals nearly 50 Omahans telling the city's collective story, according to a press release. With historical references spanning several generations, the 22,000 square foot mural (said to be one of the largest in the US) will become "a compelling narrative that defines how we think about our past, present and future" once completed.

The public art piece is expected to be finished in the summer of 2009, and will greet visitors traveling from Eppley Airfield to downtown Omaha. More info at BemisCenter.com.

Joslyn's sculpture garden gets a name

Joslyn Art Museum announced last week that it will name its sculpture garden after the late Omaha philanthropist Peter Kiewit and the trust he created at the time of his death in 1979. The newly dubbed Peter Kiewit Foundation Sculpture Garden is currently under construction and is scheduled for a public opening in the spring of 2009.

Current work on the sculpture garden includes construction on the museum's east side focusing on installing water pumps and a tank to house 6,000 re-circulating gallons of water to eventually fill and operate a future reflecting pool and two flowing water walls.

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