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The impressive *Art of the State* showcases the work of 160 Colorado artists

By Michael Paglia, February 28, 2013

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"Shroud," by Zach Reini, custom machine-woven blanket.

To put this massive show together, Parson invited Dean Sobel to share jury duty. Sobel is a Denver art-world celebrity by virtue of being the director of the Clyfford Still Museum, so the call for entries resulted in a huge volume of responses. Over a period of two full days, Parson and Sobel looked at more than 1,600 images of work by nearly 600 entrants.

The final tally was 191 works by 160 artists. When I first heard there were so many pieces in the show, I was sure it was going to be a mess — and in some sense, it is. But even if I would have preferred fewer inclusions — or a series of shows breaking out different mediums, especially photography and ceramics — all in all, it's pretty good and includes some great work

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In this group, there are some solid extensions of abstract expressionism, as exemplified by Patricia Aaron's "Crème Puff," in which scribbles in cool shades are laid over an ivory ground; "Alethes Logos," by Andy Berg, a densely composed earth-toned diptych; Judith G. Brown's lyrical "The Dance," done in dark smudges overlaid with pink and white; and Craig Marshall Smith's "Please Please Me," an automatist composition of black lines over and under sunny tones. Somewhat different, though still tipping a hat to abstract expressionism, are a black-and-white apparition, "The Other Primary Colors #4," by Carlene Frances, and Jeff Wenzel's "Dream," a beautiful essay in whites and grays.

Other artists are doing other kinds of abstraction. Wendi Harford's work is conceptual, which is apparent because in "Mass Transit" she creates expressive forms only to render them with hard edges — a reconciliation of opposites. The same is true for Amelia Caruso's "Earrach Suas Go," wherein crisp circles are clustered to make expressive shapes. Hard-edged abstraction is a big deal in Colorado, and others playing with the method include Michael Burnett, Monica Goldsmith, Adam Holloway, Lewis McInnis, William Mitchell and Ted Rehm. Jo Marks Aardsma also qualifies for membership in this group, even though she doesn't use paint to define her straight lines, but instead deconstructs the canvas itself to expose them. Combining formalism and expressionism is also what Regina Benson is doing; here she uses wavy grids as the key compositional devices in her fiber piece, "Urban Morning."

There are also three-dimensional pieces that rely on abstraction, though most have conceptual aspects, too. A tour de force is "Anchor," by Patrick Marold, an installation made from an orb of charred maple suspended by a heavy chain. Also striking in its simplicity of form and idea is the steel disc and wooden plank that make up Phillip Mann's "D42." Andy Libertone constructed a totemic stack of pierced boxes, and Bill Vielehr does something similar with an arc of cylinders. Using cut pieces of unfinished wood and raw metal, Erick Johnson has made what looks like a spinning top. Another kind of minimalism is seen in Theresa Anderson's tent form made of stripes of black-and-white vinyl, and in the pair of Derrick Velasquez wall-mounted sculptures in the form of his signature stacked vinyl strips.

Some works are more conceptual than abstract, including Rebecca DiDomenico's hauntingly beautiful "Morpho Chapel," which consists of an all-over pattern of mica chips and butterfly wings. Lauri Lynnxe Murphy, who's come back to town after a several-year hiatus in grad school, makes sculptures that look abstract but are actually about process, with the artist enlisting the help of a colony of bees to complete them. I really don't know how to describe Shawn Taylor's mixed-media sculpture — a tortured construction on top of a table on a set of steps — except to say that it's a definite success.

Other kinds of conceptual art employ recognizable imagery or even actual objects themselves, notably Phil Bender's unexpectedly luxurious "Wood Checkerboards," a grid of nine inlaid wood checkerboards, unaltered except in context; Michael Brohman's super-realistic tire done in bronze, with a patina that exactly captures the look of black rubber; and Colin Livingston's lampoon of advertising in "The Art Bucket — Purple," part of a much larger series and a continuation of the ideas he's been developing for years.

Two installations that use repeated forms includes the column of porcelain butterflies by Carla Kappa, and Emi Brady's flock of birds in the form of individually cut prints, depicting them in flight.

There are a number of works in Art of the State that refer to garments or fabrics. Among a group of found objects is a cast-iron military jacket by Laura Phelps Rogers; Chelsea Myslik's suspension piece, which looks like a cocktail dress shimmering with the reflection of dangerous-looking corsage pins sticking out all over it; and finally, the outrageous "Shroud," Zach Reini's self-portrait done as a blanket on order from Walmart! All of these exemplify conceptual realism, as do the painting of chairs by Jill Hadley Hooper, an eye-dazzling landscape collage by Libby Barbee, and Carol Haugan's hallucinogenic landscape painting.

Though it's not installed this way, there's also a photo show hidden within Art of the State. Some of the standouts are works by Brenda Biondo, Chris d'Ardenne, John Davenport, Carol Dass, Ken Gunnufson, Charles Lehman, Bonny Lhotka, Marz Pacheco, David Sharpe and Paul Sisson. The same goes for ceramics, which could be the subject of its own show: You'll find the remarkable rock-drill casts in porcelain by Frederick Doerpholz, the multi-part vessels by Toby Huffman, and Gayla Lemke's installation of a spire surrounded by little houses, some suspended from the ceiling. Last but not least is Scarlett Kanistanaux's "Quiet Mind," a monumental head finished in a flat black that is a showstopper.

Since he took over the art division at the Arvada Center a few years ago, Parson has focused on work by Colorado artists. The formula has been successful — as evidenced by the number of people making the trip to Arvada. Art of the State, now midway through its run, has been such an obvious success that Parson is considering making it a regular part of the schedule — not every year, but perhaps every three years. I think that's a great idea.

By the way, Parson is also an artist. A solo show of his work opens March 1 at Pirate.