



Spark's Fortieth-Anniversary Show, Two Solos Offer Trip Through Art History

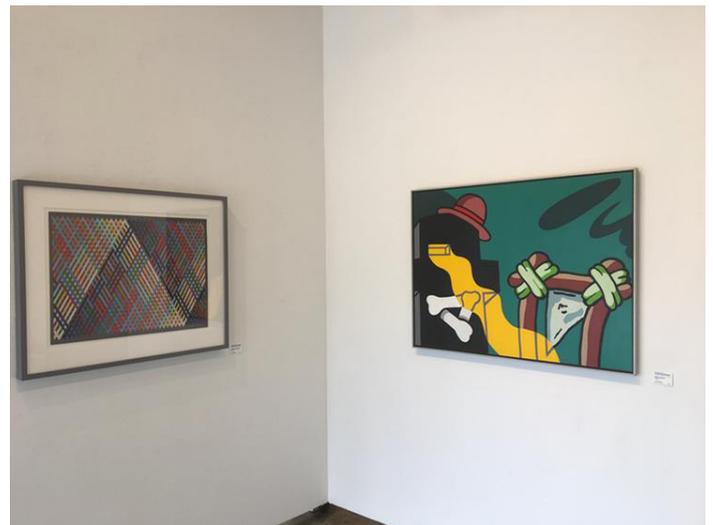
Michael Paglia / July 24, 2019

Spark Gallery is the city's oldest still-active artist co-operative; it was started by a bunch of Boulder emigres in late 1979, just a month or so before the launch of Pirate, which is often thought to be Denver's first co-op. So Spark is marking its fortieth birthday this year, and its current members decided to toast the founders, as well as other earlier Spark-sters, with a pair of exhibits this summer. The first, *Spark Gallery 40th Anniversary Show, Part I*, is open now; *Part II* opens on August 1.

A committee of members and past members put the exhibitions together, and the first one represents a history lesson on local vanguard art of a generation or so ago. Sadly, no historic narrative has been put together to explain how Spark came together, so viewers are left to figure things out on their own. I've said it before and I'll say it again: History Colorado ought to be recording the reminiscences of the founding members, most of whom are happily still alive, some of them the key contemporary artists to emerge in Colorado in the late twentieth century.

I wasn't in Denver when Spark was founded, but over the years, I've learned (and even surmised) quite a bit. First, it was named for Margaret Neumann's dog, Sparky. Second, it was the ultimate conclusion of a chain of events that form a dotted line through Colorado's contemporary art scene. Among its direct antecedents are Drop City, the Armory Group, Criss-Cross and Boulder's Edge Gallery (no connection to the co-op now in Lakewood). Taken together, these connections demonstrate how important Spark was — and is — to the big picture of this state's contemporary art history.

Though no particular style defined the efforts of Spark's founders, several of them were concerned with mathematically derived compositions — typically patterns, but also more complex axiomatic images. That's certainly the case with Clark Richert, Richard Kallweit, Charles DiJulio, Jerry Johnson, Marilyn Nelson and the nearly forgotten spiritual mentor to all of them, George Woodman. Sculptor Andy Libertone is doing something related but clearly different, though he has the same taste for hard edges as the others. (Libertone was an early guiding light for Spark, and lived above the co-op's first location, at West 32nd Avenue and Osage Street.) There were also founders who embraced a range of representational approaches, from neo-expressionist Neumann to realist John Fudge and even artists creating work with a cartoonish tilt, exemplified by Paul Gillis. His stunning if idiosyncratic "Untitled" is one of the show's standouts.



Works by Charles DiJulio (left) and Paul Gillis at Spark Gallery. Robert Delaney



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Westword



Installation view of Joe Clower: Paintings, with "Chaos Hell of Ecstasy" on the right.
Wes Magyar, courtesy Rule Gallery

Rule Gallery is now located just a block south of Spark at 808 Santa Fe Drive. Rule had been at 530 Santa Fe, but that spot is owned by Mary Mackey, and she decided to open her own gallery there, Urban Mud. The new Rule space had been 808 Projects, an ad hoc exhibition venue that was already finished out as a proper gallery, making it a great place for Rule to land. The inaugural show here is *Joe Clower: Paintings*, and it's a perfect segue from the '60s-'70s crowd at Spark, because Clower was part of that same group in Boulder. Unlike the Spark founders, though, Clower didn't move to Denver four decades ago; instead, he went to Los Angeles, though eventually he wound wind up back in Colorado.

The show comprises older paintings as well as more recent works on paper. Astoundingly, Clower was so far ahead of the pack and everything looks so fresh and new, the pieces could have been done just last month. His distinctive style includes simple compositions, sometimes

with cartoonish conventionalized depictions of recognizable things reduced to their most minimal expression. A good example is "Roadside Scene," in which a flying saucer glides over a ziggurat pyramid; the monument, in rich shades of green, is set against a taxicab yellow. "Chaos Hell of Ecstasy," in enamel on tin panels that have been tiled over a wooden board, has a neo-classical air, with a partly hidden colonnade and what looks like a section of iron fence. The palette is fire-engine red against black and white. These colors are so sharp and clean, and the painting has such a contemporary feel, it's surprising to learn that it was painted more than twenty years ago.

In contrast to the paintings, the watercolors, nearly all of which are untitled, have atmospheric qualities, and the renderings are much less flat. Clower employs more emphatic representational devices, like shadowing, with these to further the illusion of three-dimensional space. In one there's an old-timey skyscraper, in another a propeller mounted on a tower. This very strong and compelling solo is a great start for Rule's new location.



Installation view of Joe Clower: Paintings
Wes Magyar, courtesy Rule Gallery