

Westword



Cool Summer Treats

Variety is the spice of a contemporary group show at RULE.

By Michael Paglia
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The show at Rule Gallery has an informal quality, as is revealed by its prosaic title, Summer Group Exhibition, and the fact that an opening reception has not yet been held. (One is planned, however, for Friday, August 5, from 6 to 9 p.m.) For heaven's sake, cards weren't even sent out. But don't let any of this bargain-basement treatment fool you: Rule's Summer Group Exhibition is excellent, every bit as good as the MCA's 2005 Biennial BLOW OUT. That's really amazing, especially since it's apparent that gallery director Robin Rule threw it together with one hand tied behind her back -- and probably holding a martini glass in the other.

The first thing visitors will notice when entering the gallery is Mary Ehrin's installation, "Chambre d'Amour." The piece has been exhibited in Boulder, but this is its Denver unveiling. In form it suggests a birdcage, though taking the title into consideration, it's meant to be a bed. There's an oval, tent-like armature suspended from the ceiling over a

cushiony oval platform covered in white feathers on the floor. Enclosing the cushion are strings of Italian crystals that hang from the ceiling-mounted armature. The Ehrin installation has a genuine monumental quality, and it defines the mood of the show, with everything else falling in line.

Because of its size, the Ehrin crowds the things near it. I point this out because I don't want anyone to miss the marvelous suite of Andy Libertone drawings that are partly hidden by the installation. The untitled drawings, distinguished by the date of their execution, are done in glittery metallic inks on creamy papers. The linear and somewhat cubistic compositions have an early-modernist feeling that reminded me of the proto-pop style of the late Stuart Davis. Libertone is a legendary Denver artist with a thirty-year-plus career, but he's rarely exhibited in the last five years, which makes it great to come across these recent pieces at Rule.



Andy Libertone, Untitled (04-05-05), metallic ink on paper.

Next to the Libertones is a wall-mounted shelf with a selection of Jeff Starr's outlandish ceramics. Starr is one of the artists in this show who is also in the MCA biennial. The pieces at Rule are

pretty wild, including a creepily realistic rendition of a skull and several more lighthearted pieces in the form of bong. That's right, I said bong. Three of the bongs have highly figured surfaces and have been glazed in a luscious copper luster finish. Considering the nature of this topic, Starr would be best advised not to exhibit them in a government-supported venue, because the authorities in Colorado are known to clamp down on controversial art -- especially ceramics. Why, just in the past few months, clay works by Gayla Lemke and Tsehai Johnson have been censored by public officials in separate, widely publicized incidents.

Across from the Starrs are eight pieces by Jason Patz, the only other artist here who makes an appearance in the biennial. Since 2002, Patz has been taking his own picture, and despite the constrictions of this program, he's been able to create a wide range of visual experiences. For example, the photos at Rule are obviously connected to the ones at the MCA, yet they look completely different. Patz encourages this diversity through the use of different techniques, with some done in pinhole, others in 35 mm, and still others in digital processes. He has them printed in different ways, too, sometimes doing it himself and other times using a lab or a computer-printing center. He messes with his facial hair, the lighting, his shirt and the background. Surely the Patz color lightjet prints are among the genuine standouts in the MCA show, but I like the sumptuous Cibachrome prints at Rule even more. The ones at the MCA have Patz's eyes cropped out of the pictures, whereas most of the ones at Rule include his eyes.

On the opposite wall are two intriguing oil-on-canvas paintings by one of the acknowledged contemporary masters of the area, Dale Chisman. These paintings give us a hint of what his new work looks like in advance of his Rule solo scheduled for later this year. The



Jeff Starr, (from left to right) Silver, 2004, Skull with Gold Tooth, 2004, Blue Bong, 2005, MK Ultra, 2004, Goldfinger, 2004.

paintings, though referencing abstract-expressionism as usual, seem also to be inspired by earlier modernist approaches. They have a Matisse-ian feeling to me, which is something of a shock coming from Chisman. As if that weren't enough, they look like still-life scenes, with the painted grid filling the ground and evoking wallpaper, and the amorphous blobs on the surface standing in for a potted plant or a vase of flowers. Despite this imagery, the paintings are not precious, and still sport the bold brushwork for which Chisman is known.



Dale Chisman, Pillow 3, 2005, oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches.

Around the corner from the Chismans is a single sublime painting by Clark Richert, another local contemporary master, titled "Snelsonian Motion," an acrylic on canvas. The painting is done in a deep aqua covered with multicolored lines that describe the movement of particles, according to the tenets of Snelsonian motion. Luckily for me, there's no need to have any understanding of physics to appreciate how utterly beautiful this Richert painting is.

The Summer Group Exhibition at Rule is the peer of the MCA's biennial. It's even better in some ways because it brings together several generations of Denver artists under one roof, from old-timers like Libertone, Chisman and Richert, who started their careers in the '60s, to kids like Patz, who was wasn't even born until the 1980s.



Mary Ehrin, Chambre d'Amour, 2003, crystals, steel, satin cushion with ostrich feathers, 13 x 8.5 feet.