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ART BRIEFS ARCHIVES

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Avant garden

Writer: [JANERA SOLOMON](#)

"Seriously good art is always surprising," writes Terry Smith, the juror for this year's Associated Artists of Pittsburgh exhibition, in the show's catalog. "Contemporary" and "Pittsburgh" can seem worlds apart -- especially in art. But the AAP's 95th annual show, held at The Andy Warhol Museum, takes ten steps forward to change that perception.

The Annual far exceeds expectations, delivering a brilliant range of works rich in style, mediums and complexities.

Smith, a professor of contemporary art history at the University of Pittsburgh, selected 49 artists and 70 works for the show. Politics fuels many of the pieces, and surprisingly animates even traditional mediums such as quilting. Some of the show's fiber artists present some of the strongest commentary. Shawn Quinlan's "Jesus Get Your Gun," for instance, features a familiar personage, minus the robes and sporting a cowboy vest, neckerchief and rifle. Another quilt, Penny Mateer's "Election 2004," consists of imagery from a series of posters made by Pittsburgh's anti-Bush Partisan Project.

Social commentary continues within a variety of painted works. Artist Mark Zets unravels the American flag into a series of abstract markings, while Terri Perpich's "The Power of Images" critiques American consumption of the Terri Schiavo case with a caricature of Schiavo herself.

The show's photography component strongly presents strong images, from clean, barely visible representations to intense portraits and digitally enhanced works. Powerful portraits such as Aaronel deRoy Gruber's "Lifeless Corridors at the Institution," an image of a former mental hospital, and Tom Davies' digitally altered rendering of a particularly desolate Junction Hollow, capture Pittsburgh's intricacies skillfully.

In painting, the work of Mark Weleski stands out. With its high-contrast abstractions and interesting shapes, it feels like the controlled spontaneity of a great jazz solo.

Additional unexpected gems includes Akiko Katani's "Storm - Daniel," a beautiful piece rendered in black silk woven into layers of linen scrim. Jeff Zets' "Graduation," reminiscent of Romare Bearden's collages, addresses issues of race and education.

The show's sculptural pieces are equally strong, with Ronald Nigro's wall pieces -- meticulously compiled metallic assemblages -- and Gary Zaks' "Hip Hop Hiccups," a tower of copper, tin, wood and a harlequin plant.

Some pieces seem to walk the line between clever and meaningless, for example Carole Stremple's "flushable" -- a ceramic female mannequin holding a small male figure over a toilet -- and Patty Gallagher's "Sprout," featuring a gray-hued baby doll embedded in a miniature garden. But overall the work is challenging and well executed. The show provides the right dose of intellectual and sensual stimulation; Warhol, who exhibited with the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh's 38th Annual, at the Carnegie Museum of Art, would certainly approve.

In a city where contemporary art struggles -- reflected in the lack of a museum dedicated to it -- a show such as this is difficult to present. Some viewers, accustomed to landscapes and watercolors, might find it troubling. But neither is the show fully contemporary, lacking as it does installations and media art -- just the sort of work that often goes unmade here for lack of a venue to show it.

Commitment to change and innovation is a prerequisite of the contemporary. The AAP Annual affords Pittsburgh the opportunity to experience and support fresh work in the region. This show alone might not change perceptions of the seriousness of contemporary art in Pittsburgh, but it's a step in the right direction.

The Associated Artists of Pittsburgh 95th Annual Exhibition continues through June 19. Andy Warhol Museum, 117 Sandusky St., North Side. 412-237-8300



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