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Abstract form in three modes: All different, but similar

 [E-Mail This Article](#)**by Claudia Rousseau**

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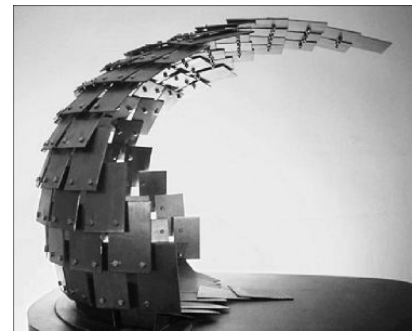
A beautifully coordinated exhibition of three artists' work at the Glenview Mansion Art Gallery in Rockville is an interesting foray into the continuing validity of abstraction. Patricia M. Gerkin's assemblages, paintings by Dominique Samyn Werbrouck's paintings and Michael Enn Sirvet's constructions are profoundly different in approach and technique. Still, a latent intent to use abstraction as a means to engage with the viewer emerges from them all.

The most compelling works are certainly Sirvet's, with their masculine industrial aesthetic. Yet, instead of overwhelming the viewer, they beckon and intrigue. These fairly large constructions show a pared simplicity of form. At first sight, "Neo-Minimalist" comes to mind. But these works are eloquent. They seem to flow from something organic in origin, sometimes very clearly. There's something irreverent about them. They shouldn't be so exciting; they shouldn't engage the viewer so much. Yet they definitely do that -- without losing one bit of aggressive presence.

I believe the issue comes down to craft. When you look at a work like "Birch Wall," you begin by taking in the beautifully polished wood segments that line up so simply along the bottom, where they fit quite neatly into their stainless steel base. Each row of these glistening blocks is attached with heavy stainless steel bolts, their shiny heads being the only other visible elements. The pale wooden shapes rise up, apparently cleanly. But at the fourth row, a slight alteration of the tops of the rectangles begins. With each rising row, the deformation becomes more prominent, until, at the top, the pieces are definitely "organic," making the whole thing suddenly tree-like. What seemed so aggressively industrial at the outset now seems almost whimsical.

Alternatively, in "Cherry Wall," even rows of seven identical rectangles are attached to rows of eight on the other side with those same huge bolts -- a Sirvet signature. The interest is the shift in number. Yet perhaps because of the insistence on craft -- the evidence that an artist made the work and is the result of a series of interlocking decisions given concrete form with his hand -- the work speaks to rather than distances the viewer.

In its essence then, Sirvet's work is Modernist rather than Minimalist. His abstraction is derived from an analysis of nature. He refers in his statement to seeing the "simple lines and shapes of underlying motion and energy, the revealed base equations ... simplicity within complexity." Sirvet is a trained industrial designer, with a degree in structural/civil engineering. When he talks about "revealed equations," this is precisely what he means: the hidden mathematical basis of organic form.

*Submitted photo*

Michael Enn Sirvet's "Thrust" reveals the hidden mathematics of motion and organic form.

An excellent example is the work entitled "Thrust" in this exhibition, but at another time called "Wave." Either title suits the piece that seems to track the mathematical curve of a wave, or embody the motion and energy of something thrusting forward. It does so with perfectly formed steel plates bolted together in exact measure to create the curved form. The visual interest is both in the integrity of the materials and the elegance of the shape. But these are also the key to works not so simple in form -- works like "Earthenform #1" or "The Artist's Bed," works that won't be such a surprise to the viewer if seen from this point of view.

Dominique Samyn Werbrouck has been painting in an abstract mode for some time, and often works in series or themes. The Glenview paintings are from the Noah Series, referring to the artist's 2-1/2-year-old grandson whose world she is attempting "to enter through [these] paintings." The theme is most evident in the larger, very colorful canvasses that are eye-catching in their use of forms that almost look like things, but, in fact, are abstract. In these paintings, letters, X's and forms that look like a child's hand drew them are intended to connect with the viewer in a very direct way. Many fall short of that aim, however, and remain fairly decorative in effect. Possibly the most riveting piece is a small work on board called "Spinning" in which a crudely drawn top fills the space. There's a strength about it that just isn't there in most of the others. Nevertheless, there's no denying the artist's ability to handle paint. If you look closely at the surfaces, you see her working in a way that recalls very early DeKooning -- layered and scraped colors, areas of thickly applied paint and very thinly drawn lines above, forms peeking in and out, sometimes becoming recognizable, most often not. At times, there's even a little of Hans Hofmann's "push and pull" going on, but too often, the compositions are weak.

A nod is in order to curator Kathleen Moran's hanging of this work. From the hallway in one direction, you can see "Spinning." At the other end is "Criss-Cross," a large oil painted in rich reds that reach out into the surrounding space. In the last analysis, Werbrouck's strength is in the appeal of the paint as active element, with the hand very much in evidence.

Pat Gerkin's assemblages are interesting, yet seem to lack a general sense of what they're about. She uses recycled materials such as crushed metal parts and buttons, cigar boxes and old screws, which she often paints over, like Louise Nevelson did, but without the scale of that older artist's work. Their small size forces close viewing, which isn't always rewarded with elegant craftsmanship or aesthetic, formal or iconographical connections among the parts. Many smaller pieces tend to the two-dimensional, and are frequently disappointing. Nevertheless, there are exceptions. Indeed, the success of works like "A Child's Tale," "Unopened Book" and "A Book of Days" is in the use of more intriguing arrangements of the elements, more exciting color relations and allowing the title's allusion to emerge more fully, particularly in works where there is writing or pasted bits of sacred texts, for example. I also was drawn to the works that seemed more topical in theme, such as "Betrayal," with its barbed wire and locks, and "Tattered Dream," with rather simple but strongly composed elements of wire mesh, plywood from a crate, crushed car parts and, most eloquently, a tattered American flag hanging limply from the corner.

The exhibit is at Glenview Mansion, 603 Edmonston Drive, Rockville, through June 29. Call 240-314-8682.

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