

The Washington Post

'New Talent' at Signal 66: Well, That's Half Right

by Ferdinand Protzman, August 17, 2000

"New" is a small word with a limited variety of definitions, none of which justifies giving the group exhibition at Signal 66 art space the deceptive title "New Talent."

In the broader art world, that term applies to shows featuring work by young or unknown artists, people whose curriculum vitae wouldn't fill a matchbook cover. A "new talent" show is often the participants' first significant public exhibition. The works are typically fresh, unfamiliar, uneven and unfettered, since the artists aren't worried about tarnishing reputations they don't have.

That isn't the case at Signal 66. Some of these ostensible new talents have been living, working and showing art for 30 years. Manon Cleary, for example, is a fine artist, and her new work--photos depicting her body being ravaged by illness--is heart-wrenching. But she teaches art at the University of the District of Columbia and has been in group and solo shows in the United States and overseas. Painter Joanne Kent is represented by Gallery K and was recently in a group show at Troyer Gallery. New, they're not.

The false advertising is the fault of the organizers, not the artists. The jury that selected the works consisted of the four men who created and run Signal 66: artists John Figura, Pat Rogan and Steve Lewis, and video master Eric Gravelly.

Stripped of its title, this becomes a group show of painting, sculpture and installation, featuring work by some relatively young artists from Washington and other parts of the country mixed with stuff from some well-established folks. It's an unfortunate agglomeration, serving mainly to highlight a persistent problem with Washington's art scene: the lack of a true entry-level gallery showing work by artists under the age of 30--genuine new talents.

Such a gallery may eventually materialize, since more young artists from the area's art schools seem to be sticking around, instead of immediately departing for New York, Chicago or Los Angeles, as was common up until a few years ago.

There is some refreshingly edgy art in the show. Sean A. Fletcher is a 30-year-old artist from Oakland, Calif., who is exploring America's sales culture by pursuing a career as an insurance salesman/ conceptual performance artist. Now that's new and scary--it ranks with being trapped on a desert island with a telemarketer mime.

Fletcher also makes art objects relating to his adventures in insurance. Three of them are tacked up on Signal 66's wall. They look like the kind of splayed animal hides that you'd find in a trophy hunter's den. But these pelts are made from business suits that Fletcher has split open and sewn onto a quiltlike backing, along with matching dress shirts and silk ties that hang down like the beast's tail.

The three suits are titled "Kenya," "Colombia" and "Sumatra," names of locales known for big-game hunting as well as their production of the high-octane coffees that power American business. It's an original and penetrating look at our culture, at notions of conformity, competitiveness, costuming and how an individual is valued.

Other younger artists share Fletcher's enthusiasm for concept-based art. Sculptor Nina Martinek, photographer Alexandra Solmssen and painter Robin Renay explore issues of identity and sexuality in disparate but powerful and intriguing ways.

Martinek, whose work has been included in local group shows, has built a steel cage in the middle of Signal 66's main gallery. The floor of the cage is filled with a dark liquid, possibly motor oil. A small ramp leads to the cage door. At the top of the ramp is a pair of tiny patent leather shoes. You can't help but look down into the reflective liquid, searching for a trace of the little girl who wore them. The piece becomes a metaphor for the murky prison that childhood memories can become.

Sexuality is the subject of Solmssen's huge black-and-white photos, showing a young, nude couple in amorous but dispassionate embrace. The pictures look a bit like Cindy Sherman's movie-still photographs. The action is frozen. The scene has a superficial glamour. The man and woman are handsome but blank.

Where Solmssen seems to be commenting on the psychological distance that can exist between physically united people, Renay's glossy, explicit paintings of people coupling in various ways examine a different kind of distance by viewing sex through the lens of mass-market pornography.

Her hot colors, thinly outlined characters and brittle, shiny surfaces make sex seem like a candy-coated commodity, a kind of voyeuristic circus act performed for reasons relating to money, desire, power, everything but love.

It's strong stuff and it isn't for everybody. But that kind of provocative art is what should be in a new-talent show. Lumping it together with immediately recognizable works by established artists, however good they might be, doesn't do justice to anyone.

New Talent at Signal 66, 926 N St. NW (rear), Thursday noon-5 p.m., Friday 5 p.m.-8 p.m., Saturday noon-5 p.m., 202-842-3436, through Aug. 26.