ART

Slought-Provoking

A new show highlights the work of relatively unknown local artists.

by Roberta Fallon

As with all words used to exclude, the term "emerging artist" is fraught with controversy. So when Slought Foundation used the hard-to-define phrase to categorize its group exhibit "Back to the Front," the theory-fueled curators in West Philadelphia poked their heads into a real-time real-world art debate.

"Back to the Front" is Slought's theme show on what it's like to be a contemporary artist in Philadelphia. It's intended to raise questions about the problems facing artists today. By using the term "emerging artists" (a favorite with curators and funders everywhere) to describe who's in their show, the four-person team of jurors hit upon one of the art problems du jour: Who exactly is an emerging artist and how is that term defined?

While the show raises the question, it doesn't answer it, since the 21 artists in the exhibit seem to have only this in common: They haven't suffered from overexposure in the Philadelphia art scene.

If there's a stamp on this exhibit, it's the high incidence of category-bending cross-disciplinary work, something that's been on the rise in Philadelphia and elsewhere for years. From a photo-based painting that looks like a screenprint to painterly videos and works that mimic airport and street signage, the art here tells a lot about the contemporary scene.

First, the art is so geographically nonspecific that the show could've been produced in Paris, London, São Paulo or Chicago. Second, many artists are reflecting the world's information overload in a value-neutral way. Finally, artists are stepping back into the real world, quoting less from the canon and creating works that feel, if a little impersonal, at least genuinely engaged with issues of human concern.

Of course no single show can predict the future, but this exhibit of uniformly good work points in several promising directions.

Much of the art is full of words. Other pieces avoid words and incorporate a kind of thunderous silence. Either way, the works all have a mediated edge and are serious communicators.

Gone are works that purposely eschew comprehension. These all want a moment of your time. They're talking to you.

Ditta Baron Hoeber's Movie is a handmade book of still photographs taken during a film shoot. As you turn the pages of the wordless book, the piece becomes a kind of slow-motion movie--a whodunit, even--as you puzzle out the story. The
Weegee with some Gerhard Richter ambiguity thrown in--is enticing.

Ben Volta's video *Airplane Hymn*, made in collaboration with Billy Blaise Dufala and Lois Volta, is a lovely 9/11-evoking elegy whose rat-a-tat soundtrack and delicate snowfall of paper airplanes kept me glued to the spot.

Michael Barker's two silent dance-like, trance-like videos in the gallery window are also captivating, evocative of a world of human beauty and vulnerability where threat lies just beneath.

Barker's a multi-tools artist, and while his videos are wordless, his other piece, *What Better Time Than ... ?,* is total verbiage. A red neon sign reading "NOW MAN" refers to artist Bruce Nauman, maker of neon art signs. But Barker's ambiguous phrase--both '50s-era beatnik lingo and '60s-era call to arms--takes the piece into non-art-world discourse.

Another word piece, which has the brutish authority of a poem in Old English, is Lydia Hunn's *Shit/Snow/ Sand*. This wall drawing, a compressed version of a work shown in Highwire Gallery's "The Shovel Show," is a matrix of one-syllable words strung together to make much--and no--sense.

And for pure sensory delight of a different nature, T.C. Moore's audio installation in the steel-walled vault is uncommonly spacey. By turns quiet and so loud it's bone-engaging, *That Which Is Known and Unknown* lulls like a waking dream--but in its high-volume phase induces anxiety akin to what you'd feel if you were being followed by a speeding siren-screaming police car.

Here's to more exhibits of Philadelphia emerging artists, no matter how you define the term.

"Back to the Front: An exhibition of Emerging Artists from the Philadelphia Region”

**sketches**

**Ramp It Up**

As any parent will tell you, children love to draw or write their names on a wall. So the marriage of artist Amy Sillman--whose imagery is childlike and direct--and the walls of the Institute of Contemporary Art's project ramp is natural. Sillman said at the project's opening that she went to the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology to look at Egyptian art before she got started on her walls. She's made one of the best ramp pieces to date in the difficult space. Her project *Procession* is a kid-like version of Egyptian-style tomb adornments with several figures in a line and one who disappears into a colorful, abstract passage of paint. The sunny colors, the life-death subject matter and the roughness of the work all come together for a charming package. By referring to the ramp's own processional nature, the artist has made a work that breathes in harmony with viewers as they walk up or down. (R.F.)


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