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Visual Arts

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Local artist Robert Brinker, pictured in his West Butternut studio, is featured in an exhibit at the Harvey/Meadows Gallery at Aspen Highlands Village.

THE PRINTMAKER & THE PENIS

By Stewart Oksenhorn
Aspen Times Staff Writer

It's more than three years ago that Robert Brinker laid eyes on the main attraction at Asia Antica, a port just outside of Rome, but what he saw there has stuck with him. Dozens and dozens of hand-laid mosaic installations, dating back to pre-Roman times and exquisitely maintained. Each country that used the port had its own mosaic, rendered on a massive scale, depicting the goods it brought into Italy.

The mosaics hit Brinker on multiple levels. For one, there was the simple visual impact. It also jolted Brinker, an artist who had specialized mostly in painting, drawing and printmaking, into thinking about more physical artistic techniques. "This was different — more about craft, technique, taking time, handwork," he said.

And Brinker was, at the time, not merely a

tourist, but a visiting artist at the American Academy in Rome. As such, he felt an obligation to do more than passively appreciate the work.

"Because I was there as a visiting artist, it was, 'What am I doing here, and how am I going to use this?'" said the 35-year-old Brinker, who moved to Aspen in 1992 to work as a summer assistant at Anderson Ranch Arts Center. "I wanted to admire it, but I wanted to respond to it. I wanted to retain some of that history and culture."

Some of the effects are obvious in the new work Brinker has in the current group exhibit at the Harvey/Meadows Gallery, at Aspen Highlands Village. The art is varied in look and medium: multimedia black-and-white "drawings" made of pencil, paper and mylar; color-filled prints; Chinese-inspired flower prints. Most of it, though, has a direct lineage to the two trips Brinker made to Italy. The collage aspect is strong, the work built around color materials. Not quite as evident is the hand-built component of the art. Brinker goes through between six and 10 pencils for each drawing.

Powerful as they were, the mosaics at Asia Anti-

ROBERT BRINKER
Harvey/Meadows Gallery,
at Aspen Highlands Village

SHOWING THROUGH

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Also exhibiting ceramic work
by Andrew Bryman
and Jason Green

ca did not wipe away Brinker's previous sensibilities. The current work is based as much in the simple, swiggy black lines that Brinker appropriated long ago from Walt Disney — think Mickey's tail, for instance — as in ancient tile mosaics. "Anything that has drawn lines, I'm tracing," he said. And his background in printmaking — Brinker managed the print shop during his second tour of duty at Anderson Ranch — influences even his drawings.

"It's not like I dropped everything and started anew," he said, at the enormous home and studio — both of which he shares with fellow artist Pamela Joseph — on West Buttermilk. "All these are helped by the fact that I used to be a printmaker. I've always been into layers, because printing is all about building with layers. People see these and say, 'Oh, it's obvious your printmaking background helped you get this far.'"

Body parts

What people don't generally say about Brinker's latest work is, "Oh, your interest in sexually explicit material is really evident here." But the human body, and what it can do, especially in conjunction with another human body, or even several other human bodies, is another interest Brinker developed during his visits to Italy.

It might be that Brinker would have landed in the realm of nudity and fornication even without the Italian influence. Joseph, Brinker's mate for 13 years, has been exploring sexuality on-and-off since the 1960s, with comic and satiric results. She and Brinker work in adjacent studios, share some artistic sensibilities, and even collaborate on occasion. Their wallpaper project "WKR-Pinc," built around images from adult graphic novels, not only appeared in the Aspen Art Museum's 2004 Aspen Valley Biennial, but, until very recently, adorned the museum's bathrooms. In Rome, Brinker was surrounded by all sorts of suggestive imagery: centuries-old nude statues in famous piazzas; spanking-new billboards with hypersexual overtones.

Part of Brinker's process is to take pains to hide, or at least obscure, the sexual element. Even in his recent series of collage portraits of porno models — which look very much like porno models — there is an element of toning down the sexuality. The hand-cut squares of paper which make up the collages are, in fact, taken from the



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Robert Brinker's print "Duccio's Angels" is featured in a group exhibit at the Harvey/Meadows Gallery.

naughty bits in skin magazines. The collage drawings in the Harvey/Meadows exhibit are said to contain sexual components; despite my best efforts, I couldn't find them. (The names of Brinker's exhibits can also play down the sexual; his 2004 show at the David Floria Gallery was ambiguously titled *Body Parts*. An upcoming exhibit at the Sara Tecchia Roma New York gallery is titled "Your Line Is Making Me So Wet Right Now. I Love It," but it is a group show, and Brinker played no part in coming up with the name.)

Brinker doesn't care to make an X-rated "Where's Waldo?" of his art. "What I don't want it to be is, 'Where's the hidden penis?' Where's the hidden sexual content?" said Brinker, who never bothered to point out such images in the work in his studio. "But it is about discovering what's there. It's there to try to hold somebody's interest, create a narrative." Brinker notes that

Sara Tecchia, his New York dealer, had to have an assistant point out the breasts and balls in his work. She had seen images of "princesses and bows," according to Brinker.

That narrative is a weaving of humor and innocence and sensuality and different kinds of beauty. And mostly that narrative takes a back seat to the formal elements of his work, and his process for making it.

"I'm not interested in shock or awe. I'm interested in that kind of imagery," said Brinker. "You can choose to look at it or not. I don't want to force it on people. I'm not preaching. I'm more interested in people coming up with their own narratives."

Politics purged

Another current project of Brinker's came not from his Italy visits, but very much from his experience as an American. "Recount of the Recount," a limited-edition series of eight individual, accordion-style books packed into one sleeve, is Brinker's reaction to the 2000 presidential election. The imagery — caricaturelike faces, all with clueless stares, of the various justices, candidates, bureaucrats and commentators — places the emphasis on the confused, corrupted aftermath of Election Day 2000.

Brinker had been working on other projects in those muddled times, but couldn't turn away from the unprecedented political power play. The books began as Saving Deface, a sprawling series of cartoonish images: Bush, Cheney, Larry King, et al, as devils, jack-o'-lanterns, KISS characters, arranged into the shape of a skull on his studio wall. When a maker of art books visited the studio to work with Joseph, he quickly saw the book potential of Brinker's project. (He didn't abandon Joseph, however: She also has a new book, "The Hundred Headless Women.")

"I was working on other stuff while watching TV and thought, if it was occupying this much time, I had to make a piece of it," explained Brinker. "I was completely disgusted with everybody."

"Recount of the Recount" purged Brinker of political art; he hasn't returned to political themes since and proclaims no desire to do so. About sex, he made no such declaration. □

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