

Redefining Emerging Artists: A CLOSER LOOK

By John Brunetti

Let's face it. Committing oneself to being an artist is not easy. Never has been. One must believe in what they are doing in the face of the enormous reality that critical recognition, or commercial success, is not guaranteed. Even the ability to simply continue making one's art, while earning a living in another capacity, is not an automatic given. While different points in an artist's life and career can prove to be tests of an individual's commitment to their art, none is as defining a moment as those early career years that label one as "an emerging artist." This has become somewhat of an inaccurate catch-all phrase to describe artists between their early twenties and late thirties who struggle to show their art after leaving school. The category of "emerging" often alternates between "young artists," which doesn't fit individuals who come out of school in their early- to mid-thirties, or those who have relocated from another city. However, what is a more accurate means of defining emerging artists is often their pattern of exhibiting. While a few "high profile" emerging artists may have gallery representation, most cut their professional teeth on the "emerging circuit."

In Chicago and its suburbs, the "circuit" consists of a variety of alternative galleries and project spaces, juried shows at city and state managed venues, sum-



"Envelopes with Rivers," by Shona Macdonald, envelopes, rice glue and MSN varnish on linen, 2000

ing their master's degrees from different programs: Macdonald, UIC; Heppner, University of North Carolina; Willey, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The fact that it has taken them between four and five years to develop recognition for their work is a valuable lesson for artists beginning a similar process. Meteoric stardom upon leaving graduate school is not the norm. Having your work immediately on the cover of *Artforum* is not the only route to success.

Perhaps it has taken these three artists this amount of time because their work is particularly idiosyncratic. Working within the very traditional mediums of collage, drawing and painting, Macdonald, Heppner and Willey create personally quirky works that are formally elegant, despite unusual choices of raw materials and subject matter. The resulting pieces are smart observations on the nature of making the art object. However, the nuances of their methods do not always make this readily apparent on first viewing. What also requires several viewings to appreciate is the artists' honesty and integrity in what they are doing. At a time when cynicism and irony appear to be more familiar attitudes in emerging artists' work, Macdonald's, Heppner's and Willey's approaches are refreshing, but seem too good to be true on first glance. Repeated exposures to their works are required to understand their almost devote aesthetic philosophies. All of these factors illustrate why time has been an important factor in their development, and perhaps suggests that it will remain so throughout their careers.

Of the three, Macdonald is the only one with permanent representation at Fassbender Gallery. Her most recent solo show was in the gallery's project room this past September. Moving from her native Scotland to Chicago in 1994 to attend graduate school at UIC, Macdonald has been actively exhibiting in group shows locally and internationally. One of her first shows out of graduate school was a summer group show at Fassbender Gallery. Most notable of her ephemeral series of drawings and collages have been her large-scale collages on linen. These meditative works of horizontal bands and undulating waves are made from the shredded strips of patterned paper found on the inside of security envelopes. Collecting and sorting large quantities of these functional decorative papers, Macdonald proceeds to "assemble" disarmingly beautiful abstractions. What saves her works from being perceived simply as decorative is the

use of a raw material whose original function was to obscure sight to create perceptual mirages.

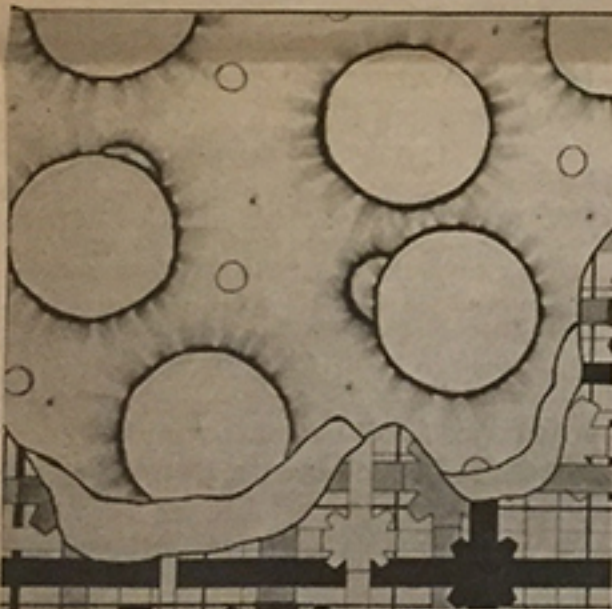
Willey shares with Macdonald an interest in transforming vernacular pattern into commentaries on the relationships between beauty and meaning. In his solo show this summer at the alternative Wicker Parker space, Body Builder & Sportsman Gallery, he showed three-dimensional abstract paintings that resembled brightly colored gift-wrapped packages. The intentions of these exuberant works were not easy to decipher. They were so well-crafted that their seriousness elevated them beyond simple irreverent parodies of formalist painting. Willey continues to distill his abstract vocabulary of bold stripes, celestial bows and planetary polka dots in his black and white drawings, several of which were featured in the prestigious curated show, "Out of Line: Drawings By Illinois Artists," at the Chicago Cultural Center this past spring. Willey is an example of how the different venues in Chicago can work for emerging artists: the Cultural Center providing wider exposure and placing his work in the context of established artists, while the smaller alternatives have allowed him to take risks with his paintings.

A California native, Kevin Heppner saw Chicago as the place to get his career started after graduate school. While his work has not been as locally visible as Macdonald and Willey, he has started to make progress with his work being included in a small works show at Fassbender Gallery and more prominently in the "Out of Line" drawing exhibition at the Cultural Center. Using repetition of forms to find meaning in the physical rigors of drawing, his process-driven works represent the vitality that one should find in emerging artist's works. Often using large rolls of paper, Heppner works obsessively with a variety of media - graphite, ink, paint - to make multiple responses to reproductions from sources as diverse as Leonardo DaVinci's sketchbooks to anatomy and astronomy textbooks. His drawings, while not as improvisational, capture the spirit of the master artist Cy Twombly's nervous energy. The resulting drawings have the spontaneity of sketchbook doodles raised to the level of personal hieroglyphs by their expanded scale. One can only look forward to seeing the development of Heppner's drawings, as well as Macdonald's and Willey's work, in future shows that allow them to develop their emerging potential.

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Untitled pencil and carbon on paper by Kevin Heppner, 2000



"Teaser," by Brian Willey, mixed media on paper mounted on canvas, 2000

mer theme shows developed by commercial galleries, as well as university and college galleries. This exhibition framework is not only important for the artists, but serves critics, curators and gallery directors by providing multiple opportunities to see the development of an artist over time, and to see how their work holds up in different contexts. As a critic, I continually redefine the term "emerging" based on this circuit of shows. For me, the term should be thought of as a verb, not an adjective. For an artist to truly be emerging in my view, their work must continually show development and a willingness to push themselves and take risks throughout this early part of their career. The artists who understand that growth, not necessarily newness, is the most important asset of being an emerging artist are able to effectively make the transitions required throughout their careers. The artists whom I have selected to highlight here represent this criteria.

Shona Macdonald, Kevin Heppner and Brian Willey began exhibiting in Chicago in the mid-'90s after earn-