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**Painting exhibits leave viewer with mix of exhilaration and melancholy**

Impermanence and loss haunt nearly every work in two superb painting shows up in Oakland County.

All the same, the subject matter and visual tone of the two Detroit-area artists could hardly be more different. Robert Schefman's "Collected Knowledge," at Birmingham's Robert Kidd Gallery through June 31, deals exclusively in human studies. By contrast, Clinton Snider, with a show at Ferndale's Susanne Hilberry Gallery through June 16, prowls the empty corners of towns and big cities, often in the process of being reclaimed by nature.

Worlds apart though they might be, each show leaves the viewer with a funny mix of exhilaration and melancholy.

Of the two artists, Schefman – an abstract sculptor turned painter – wields the brighter aesthetic. His lush canvases fairly pulsate with life. Schefman's human characters, robust and bursting with health, inhabit a sunlit world with sharply edged shadows and flashes of light.

In "Where Do the Robots Go?" a boy in a white shirt, black tie and tousled hair kneels on a dock, peering into the bright shallows below. Books, pieces of stationary and an old-fashioned toy truck rest like dead leaves on the lake bottom, sometimes held down by the occasional stone. Vivid light ripples through the water like electricity.

Realism often gets a bad rap in the high-faluting art world, but Schefman's eye and manual dexterity are astounding. You know how deep water is, how it would feel on your hand and how heavy each rock would be.

On the dock next to the boy is another toy he's fished out, a little red pressed-steel robot of the sort kids played with before everything went plastic. It's a stand-in for all those parts of life that have been crushed under technology's relentless advance, an amusing relic of yesterday's long-forgotten "future." Schefman's larger concern is paper artifacts – the sort you

used to find in attics, whether photos, letters or diaries – are going the way of that little unmourned robot.

“When my mom moved,” Schefman says, “I got all the old stuff – my father’s letter from WWII, even letters from the War Department. It got me thinking about my kids’ grandkids – will they have their parents’ or grandparents’ love letters on Twitter or in email? Will they have letters at all?”

Many of the works in “Collected Knowledge” deal with this threat to the past. But others, like the handsome “Mrs. Green, with the Candlestick,” come from Schefman’s “Clue” series, character studies drawn from the popular kids’ game.

Be sure to poke into the back room with Schefman’s large drawings inspired by a trip to Israel. A towering column of smoke dominates most of these – whether rising above a young man rebuilding a shattered wall or a suburban couple lounging by a backyard pool – a herald of ever-present danger.

If Schefman’s paintings virtually sparke, Snider’s, by contrast, conjure up winter light and leaden skies so convincing you might find yourself shivering.

Most of the paintings in this large retrospective at the Hilberry Gallery through June 16, deal with Snider’s enduring fascination – the ragged urban borders where nature’s chaos meets decaying human order, whether in Detroit, along the Gulf Coast or in Baltimore.

Take “The Fall,” where saplings and bushes push up through the sidewalk in front of an empty modernist building. With its clear air of abandonment set in a larger pastoral landscape, the looming white structure feels like a decrepit Greek temple tucked into a 19<sup>th</sup>-century history painting, a comment on a great society’s mystifying collapse.

But not all is doom and decay, however artfully rendered. A number of pieces, like “It’s Happening” and “Lobo Fades into the Sunset,” star animals Clinton has crafted with humor and affection.

But it’s his city scences that grab and won’t let go. “Haunting” is much overused in art writing, but that’s the best word for these collapsing houses and lonesome urban vignettes. They’re spooky, sad and improbably beautiful.