

From Gas Station at AKA Gallery.

Photograph by: Gord Waldner, The Starphoenix , The Starphoenix

Gas Station By Derek Sandbeck and David Dyck

AKA Gallery project space until Friday

If you need an antidote for David Thauberger's Road Trip retrospective (Mendel Gallery, spring 2014), I have good news for you. You'll find it this month at the AKA's project space. Derek Sandbeck and David Dyck offer the antithesis to Thauberger's idealized, superficial prairie buildings and yawning blue skies.

While using the same subjects as Thauberger (a gas station, a convenience store), Sandbeck and Dyck provide a depth and richness through mysterious backstories and possibilities which stayed with me long after seeing the show.

Two photographs of lonely nighttime scenes are reproduced in multiple Andy Warhol Campbell's-soup-can fashion, adding a Pop Art element to new artistic metaphors. It works because a gas station is just so ordinary, so common, becoming otherworldly when it is plucked out of the night for our observation. Sandbeck and Dyck go to the heart of darkness, where anything is possible.

To me, the energy powering the exhibition is a life-size, brightly painted sign on the wall, as if copied from the outside of a convenience store. It's a curious list of what weary travellers might find inside. It's poetry to me: Candy, Time to Go, Told you once, Soft Spot, More More, I spied you first, Rat Race, etc.

This list makes me think about what might really be inside a lonely gas station somewhere out there in the night. The only certainty is that a gas station can be an oasis of thought.

My only disappointment about this show is that it is far too small.

UNTITLED (NEW VISIONS)

Works by Maggie Groat and Barbara Hobot

AKA Gallery until Feb. 28

I have come to expect the unexpected when I visit the AKA artist-run gallery, an art incubation chamber on 20th Street where high ideals prevail and where pandering to the status quo has no place. This week, I walked into the middle of a conversation between Barbara Hobot and Maggie Groat. Neither artist was actually present, but in true AKA style, their voices took shape through 21 experimental works of art.

It's hard to tell which mixed-media pieces were made by Groat and which were Hobot's. Curator and executive director Tarin Hughes has eliminated all labels and titles from the walls for good reason. By providing no words to identify the artworks, it's up to the viewer to activate their own understanding of the artist's intent. With nothing to lose, I gave it a go.

On my first pass, I only looked at shapes. On a second perimeter spin, I looked only at materials. The third time around, I let shadows and light be my guide. I discovered that there is a kind of freedom in that approach because no one is dictating what I should be seeing or thinking. The artist is absent, the art is not.

A cluster of little mirrors lays flat on a pedestal and seems to exist only to reflect light back at the white wall above it in skewed shapes and perplexity. Nearby, there is a paper spiral in the shape of a miniature Guggenheim Art Gallery, slumped out from the wall. This could be a tongue-in-cheek reference to modern art or maybe not.

Throughout the gallery are several webbed fishnet-looking pieces, delicate and floating in their own shadows, acting as invisible glue uniting the whole show. There was plenty of beauty and humour and curiosity throughout the room.

One of these artists appears to be a collector of junk, a bottom feeder on the lookout for useful salvage, while the other artist is fascinated by materials like veneers, vinyl, metal and paper. Groat's and Hobot's conversation might be completely over my head, but their dialogue is intensified by proximity and opportunity.

As for me, I have decided to stop reading labels and spend more time looking at light and shadows.

With thanks to Bruce Montcombroux, gallery outreach co-ordinator, for his thoughtful comments.

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