

'Money, Wheels, and Random Legs' a strong show at a unique space



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What makes for an effective group exhibition? Is it a smartly curated showcase of like-minded artists? A broad range of works with some topical or thematic through line? A collection of pieces that make individual statements but are even more expressive when placed in dialogue?

These kinds of questions spring to mind when viewing "Money, Wheels, and Random Legs," a group show at Firecat Projects, the former Bucktown studio of Tony Fitzpatrick, now an independent gallery with a unique no-commission policy run by Fitzpatrick's business partner, Stan Klein. There's little that connects the work of its three featured artists Oriane Stender, Kyle Gallup and Melissa Stern — not overtly. All are midcareer artists from New York City who happen to be women, but biographical details aside, their practices are strikingly different.

Stender weaves thinly X-acto'd strips of U.S. currency (the real green stuff) with Pop Art images (Warhol flowers, Marilyn Monroe) to surprisingly hypnotic effect. She draws on dollar bills with India ink, leaving behind only the slightest curlicue or tiny, ominous Eye of Providence. "I started working with money about 15 years ago and didn't think I'd still be working with it after so long," the Brooklyn-based artist says, "But there's just so much imagery in the one-dollar bill!"

Gallup's collaged paintings, meanwhile, revolve around Coney Island's Wonder Wheel. Combining lithographic print fragments, thick layers of paint, and fine, exacting ink marks, her works situate the iconic Ferris wheel in dreamlike landscapes — and sometimes nightmarish ones, like a scene out of Ray Bradbury's timeless fall fantasy novel, "Something Wicked This Way Comes." For Gallup, a longtime Upper West Sider, the wheel has become "a sort of mantra."

Stern makes figurative sculpture and assemblage favoring pastel scribbles, crudely drawn faces, and objects both found and fabricated: a curl of copper wire here; clay appendages there; scraps of a Sanskrit newspaper; a cluster of stones ... "I work like a handyman cobbling together drawings and sculptures from elements found, borrowed and imagined," says the self-taught artist who resides in Chelsea.

Does the work of these artists make any sense together? Perhaps Klein anticipated this question — or even hoped to poke fun at it — when he originally suggested they call the show "Three Broads from New York." "I thought it was hilarious!" Stern says of the name. "But it didn't fly." Stern admits she was unfamiliar with the work of Stender and Gallup prior to the exhibition, but took Klein's suggestion and met with them in New York. "I thought they were neat people and the work was neat, but I didn't really get the connection. Contentwise, our works have very little relationship to each other."

Stender felt the same way: "When Stan first put us together for whatever reason, I didn't quite see it." Gallup, for her part, called the grouping "kind of a question mark."

Nonetheless, the three settled on "Money, Wheels and Random Legs," which speaks more directly to the subject matter than "Three Broads from New

York" while staying on-brand with Firecat's irreverent humor. Even with a title intact, It wasn't until the artists arrived at the opening in late September and saw their works installed alongside one another that things started to cohere, however subtly.

"Stan made these connections between our work that I never would've imagined," Stern says. "The installation created these interesting, beautiful color connections. There's a whole back wall featuring work by all three of us that's grayish-green with hints of yellow — it's really kind of lyrical and very gentle."

The layout's effectiveness goes beyond color theory: Stern's stripped-down assemblages are scattered among Gallup's moody "Wonder Wheel" series and Stender's intricate dollar-bill weavings, not only adding dimensionality but also providing some breathing room in a progression of densely detailed 2-D pieces. Because Gallup and Stender study the same subjects over and over, this staggering means the viewer is better able to appreciate subtle differences and developments in each series.

All three make inventive use of mixed materials and have a darkly comedic tone. See: Marilyn Monroe's face juxtaposed with George Washington's ("Marilyn Marilyn Dollar" by Stender); a surrealist carnival-like landscape rendered in metallic paint and metal leaf ("Midas's Playground" by Gallup); and a quirky drawing/sculpture hybrid featuring a roughly sketched face with full lips, broken ceramics for teeth and little wooden pineapples for eyes ("Aloha" by Stern).

Perhaps the best kind of group show is ones where the links between artists and pieces aren't immediately detectable but require a little more digging. "The more I looked at their work, the more I saw commonalities," curator Klein says. "There's a certain intricacy that each brings to some element of their work that, when installed together, is elevated."

Furthermore, he says, their personalities and where they are in their careers seemed to fit. Firecat Projects makes a point to bring attention to under-sung midcareer artists. "Maybe they've hit a plateau, having done a lot of shows or been with a gallery and not been happy with it," he says. "Rather than take commissions, we empower them to sort of run their own interference."

Via their Firecat exhibition, the artists in "Money, Wheels and Random Legs" have not only been able to reach a wider Midwestern audience, but they've found new allies in New York, a city saturated with artists.

"When I came to Chicago and saw the works together I was shocked," Gallup says. "There's such incredible dialogue going on between them. But Stan is amazing at that. He has a vision in his mind and people on his radar and he just goes for it."

"Money, Wheels and Random Legs," through Oct. 17. Firecat Projects, 2124 N. Damen Ave. Free, 773-342-5381 or www.firecatprojects.org

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