

Lift Off launches the artwork of eighteen new Master of Fine Arts graduates from San Jose State University. The work of these emerging artists is not only innovative and fresh, but provides a glimpse into the upcoming trends in the art of tomorrow. The work in this exhibition is representative of the media, styles, approach and content that artists are working with today.

Paintings by Terry Thompson use a photo-realist style to depict the fading neon signs of a by-gone San Jose while the paintings of Justin Amrhein whimsically play on the notion of what exactly a WMD could look like. Sara Cole combines materials such as beeswax and graphite powder to create drawings of an abstracted personal iconography. Photography by Richard C. Clapp, Kevin Powers and Gaku Watanabe all begin with the notion of documentation, but with varying methods and narratives.

The sculptural materials range from traditional ceramic, steel and bronze to paper, scrap wood and mixed-media installation. Martins Bluzma, Shelby Smith and Keith Southern create work that challenges the definition and value of art and the relationship between artist, viewer and environment. Using clay, Cynthia Siegel and Adam Caldwell work figuratively to reflect upon the psychology of society. The delicate paper school houses by Pilar Agüero-Esparza and the smooth stainless-steel work by Tai Pomara use metaphoric imagery to make political commentary.

San Jose State University is internationally renowned for its strong program in digital art, known as CADRE. *Lift Off* features five graduates from this program who use new media to address current issues that range from politics to art to our personal relationships. John Pierre Bruneau has created an interactive piece that addresses themes of surveillance and the loss of privacy in the age of technology. The digital videos by Skyler Thomas in the Project Room examine the impact of mankind on the environment. Vera Fainshtein questions the status of classical modernist painting in an age of experimentation and new media. Kanako Ota is reducing the medium of digital video to its formal elements to explore its meaning and place in art. Michael Weisert's *Telepresent Tug of War* aims to create a virtual connection between its participants that goes far beyond the act of typing on a keyboard.

The MFA program at San Jose state has a reputation for craftsmanship in all media, pushing students to explore cutting edge tools and materials to present work that is rich in content. The MFA candidates are encouraged to develop their art in the context of historical precedent as well as contemporary theories and climate. This exhibition is a window into what is happening in the most current movements as well as a debut for the artists as they "lift off."

Pilar Agüero-Esparza

In her installation, Pilar Agüero-Esparza references the national “No Child Left Behind” legislation and makes a clear comment on the state of the California education system. She uses handwriting paper from grade school dipped in wax, sewn together and precariously balanced to create a sense of nostalgia about a bygone education system. Upon observation, the viewer is able to see that rats have infiltrated the fragile honeycomb construction, further illustrating the decay of our schools.

Agüero-Esparza often uses household materials from soap to chapstick and paper which she shapes into forms that reference home, childhood and issues of femininity.

Justin Amrhein

During the past several years, the term “WMD” has become part of the international lexicon. The ongoing and elusive search for Weapons of Mass Destruction created an enigmatic visual idea that inspired Justin Amrhein. He says “my images are outrageous, absurd and irrational, not unlike the concept of a WMD.” Each painting utilizes perspective, color and line to make an object that confuses the boundaries between real and imaginary, functional and ineffectual.

John Pierre Bruneau

In *Sticky Anonymity*, John Pierre Bruneau uses the audience as performer to raise the issue of increased surveillance in our society and the gradual loss of our right to privacy. This work is inspired by the reaction of viewers caught in other surveillance pieces. Bruneau found that much of his audience was more concerned about being involved in art mocking society than in a surveilled society itself. He has created a whimsical interactive installation where anyone who wants to remain anonymous is able to do so. When you see yourself on the screen, place the pixilation bubble over your face, or anything else you want to censor.

Martins Bluzma

The work of Martins Bluzma often consists of to-scale replicas of environments combined with hidden treasure. These objects comment on the perception of reality and the quantification of value. In *Untitled (object 1)*, Bluzma has constructed a gallery under which an image of a wrapped box is buried. *Untitled (object 2)* is the same box, under glass, on a pedestal. Both the gallery and the pedestal are used for presenting art. Here a box is presented. No one knows what is in the box. This presentation of the object asks the viewer to assess the value of the object based on its environment, treatment and preconceived ideas of art.

Adam Caldwell

Adam Caldwell's humorous narrative installations explore self-identity. They attempt to illustrate the abstract notions we use to define behavior. The metaphor of the baby head can represent the rawest desires and emotions that drive human behavior. Yet it also gives rise to the idea of the blank slate – the baby will learn from its parents, teachers and environment. This brings to bear the psychological debate over the importance of nature vs. nurture in a child's upbringing and consequential development. In *Prize* the baby is clearly focused on the object of his desire, whether or not he obtains it depends on others. Whether or not his desires are met shapes his future behavior.

Richard C. Clapp

Over the years the snapshot has become the source and embodiment of memories: holidays, vacations and other momentous events are captured and stored for future reference and reflection. In this series, Richard C. Clapp raises the question of what exactly is contained in a snapshot. As we all know from looking at other people's photos, they often contain more than meets the eye. These images document the artist's experiences as well as ideas and philosophies. Yet, without further explanation they remain a mystery to the viewer.

Sara Cole

Sara Cole's iconography is a combination of abstract and figurative forms reflecting her interest in the transformation from living to dying, and from dying to regeneration as seen through ancestral lineage. Celtic symbology, Buddhist iconography, spirals and circles are used to describe the dichotomy of linear time and sacred time.

This imagery is drawn on the surface of medical records and phonebook listings thus reintroducing past events into present circumstances.

Vera Fainshtein

Vera Fainshtein combines digital video, sound and stage-like sets to produce environments that purposely blur the boundary between art and life. By introducing non-art objects as art, she makes reference to the Duchampian notions of Readymade as well as the work of conceptual and installation artists of the '70s. Fainshtein also incorporates the aesthetics or strategies of more traditional representational painting.

The goal of this installation is to raise the question of the status of classical and modernist painting in the age of experimentation and new media. Some contemporary critics, such as Donald Kuspit, have declared that today's postmodern times are the "end of art." Others, such as Arthur Danto, have pronounced an "end of the linear history of art." This digital video installation, which borrows its title from Danto's *After the End of Art*, has been created as a direct response to the aforementioned debate.

Kanako Ota

Kanako Ota has translated Johannes Brahms' full score of "Variations of a Theme by Joseph Haydn" into the color bands you see on the screen. Ota has utilized editing software to assign colors and layers to the alphabetic notes of each of the 14 different instruments. Thus, she has translated the musical harmony into a visual one. Translation, whether between idea and word, Japanese and English, or code and operation is a main concern in Ota's work.

Linked with her concept of translation is that of reduction. Here the artist takes a structural approach by defining the irreducible material elements of the digital video medium itself: time, ambient noise, light and color, movement, layers, flatness and frame. These become the vocabulary for the translation of the musical score.

Tai Pomara

Tai Pomara's current work is the result of his reflection and effort to sympathetically identify with those in opposition to U.S. and Israeli interests in Palestine and Iraq. In a broad sense, his work identifies the history, romanticism, and emotion that motivate the *partisan* who is confronted by the violence of overwhelming power.

Kevin Powers

Golden Sections are also referred to as Golden Proportions, the Golden Mean or Fibonacci numbers. It is a natural occurring mathematical parameter that is used to define natural harmony and "scientifically" explain beauty based on physical proportions. Numerous studies and experiments have demonstrated that this representation creates an aesthetic appeal, independent from ethnic or civilization factors.

Powers' *Golden Sections* series is a contemporary adaptation of the long tradition of *HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vanitas" \o "Vanitas" vanitas* (*HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latin" \o "Latin" Latin for "* *HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vanity" \o "Vanity" vanity*”) in art. This genre is perhaps best known by the Dutch Master paintings of fading flowers that were intended to remind society of the futility and transience of earthly beauty and pleasure. In his work, Powers uses graphic and grotesque images to ironically depict the lengths we go to in order to become “perfect.”

Cynthia Siegel

Cynthia Siegel's sculptural figures begin with a gesture that characterizes a particular

emotion. She finds that personal emotions often reflect the more universal psychology of society. This series depicts musings on the nature of power. The individual figures were initially inspired by *The Lord of the Flies* by William Golding coupled with the fact that we are a nation at war. *Scrimmage* holds a conch shell and a pair of eyeglasses. In *The Lord of the Flies* the boy who held the conch shell could speak and he who had the glasses could make fire.

The symbols and objects help to further define these emotional archetypes. A standard bearer leads the troops into war carrying the nation's flag. Siegel's *Standard Bearer* carries two koi fish. Koi are traditionally owned by the wealthy and are a status symbol. They are also bottom feeders. This clever play on meaning makes a subtle comment on the US involvement in Iraq. However, Siegel aims to use symbols that have several meanings so the ultimate interpretation becomes open-ended as the viewer completes the narrative with personal knowledge and experience.

Shelby Smith

Shelby Smith is investigating the relationships between attraction and repulsion, humor and oddity. To this end, his ambiguously organic forms are perplexing and often sexual and the colors are garish. His sculpture is intentionally texturally provocative in an attempt to lure the viewer into the forbidden act of touching the object. At once beautiful, perplexing and amusing, Smith's sculptures are ultimately about the pleasure of discovery, imagination and humor.

Keith Southern

These end pieces of lumber were purchased for ~\$38.

When I bought these many pieces of small wood from Southern Lumber [(408) 297-WOOD] I stood beside a full cart and talked to the lady at the register. When she realized what exactly I was buying, she made a look on her face that said, sarcastically, "... great." She and I then spent the next ten minutes sorting and stacking the pieces according to their price tags. She asked me what I was going to use them for, I said I was going to paint on them. "O, neat." When another worker came by to help out, she informed him that "he's going to use them for an art project." I guess she was right.

-Keith Southern

Keith Southern's constructions and photographic installations rely on the vague and slippery definition of art. He pushes this notion to its limits by creating work from mundane materials or depicting mundane activities and placing them in a professional exhibition space. It is also intended to reveal the time, progression and development of thought that goes into the making of art.

Skyler Thomas

In this series of videos, Skyler Thomas is making “quiet statements” regarding man’s interaction with himself, the environment and other species. His videos are romantic in the sense that they are dreamlike, passionate and inspired by idealism.

White Dream is the result of Thomas’ time in South Africa where he was able to film great white sharks as well as interview Andre Hartman, one of the only human beings to interact with a great white in open water. Footage of this interaction is combined with surreal imagery. Thomas is concerned with how the ignorant fear of potential attack pits man against shark, in a battle that sharks can’t win.

Inconvenient is a visual narrative based on actual events in Thomas’ home town when a woman, tired of taking care of her ill husband, takes his life. This brief glimpse at the darker side of human behavior illustrates the self-centered and irreversible decisions made by man.

In *Virus* Thomas juxtaposes a peaceful glimpse at the natural world with a chaotic urban environment.

Terry Thompson

Terry Thompson has always had a passion for the form and function of neon signs. His paintings combine his experience repairing and fabricating high-tech equipment with his fascination for words as symbols. He is still able to discern the initial craftsmanship and artistry of neon despite all the current kitsch associations. Thompson chooses older signs, overlooked relics in a neglected landscape of run down buildings and abandoned businesses. Yet, despite their nearly phantom presence, the cropped letters and signs are easily completed by the viewer, as though the neon image is permanently emblazoned in our mind’s eye. As these signs are lost, so are the businesses and the era they represented.

Gaku Watanabe

Gaku Watanabe grew up in a suburb of Tokyo in the ‘70’s and ‘80’s. It was a time when people were working hard for a better life, and professional wrestling was very popular. Watanabe used to watch all his “hero’s” fights and follow the media stories. Professional wrestling is a soap opera: there are good guys and bad guys. Good guys act clean and follow the rules. Bad guys are clever and break the rules. Their fights and feats are a metaphor for the struggles of the working class. When Watanabe came to the United States, he was introduced to Mexican wrestling and saw a striking similarity to the Japanese wrestling of his childhood. In this series of photographs, Watanabe draws upon his memories of heroes that were outlandish and bizarre to document the culture of wrestling in Mexico during a time when the people there are working hard for a better life.

Michael Weisert

This video documents Michael Weisert's *Telepresent Tug of War* held in April, 2006. Two large steel cages, each housing a two-ton winch, were engaged in a competition that spanned downtown San Jose. The game worked just as traditional tug-of-war games: each team tried to tug the opponent forward. But instead of competing directly against each other, the teams were a mile apart as they pulled simultaneously. A computer code measured and compared strength data and adjusted the winch accordingly for a virtual competition.

Telepresent Tug of War was inspired by other artists working in haptics, telepresence and robotics. Weisert was also inspired by sporting events and how an audience is affected by competition. This game allowed the viewer to become part of the performance through participation and the artist documented the emergent team pride, show-boating and enthusiasm. Weisert also aimed to create a virtual community experience that would transform the typical static text exchange into one with actual physical feedback: as one team pulled harder to victory, the competitors found themselves suddenly thrown off balance and pitched forward onto the floor.

Night Moves

First Street Window

Inga Dorosz and Amanda Fin: *The Trottle Sink*

The Trottle Sink is an absurd metaphor for escape. Inga Dorosz, who grew up in communist Poland and suburban Los Angeles, peeled potatoes everyday. While doing so under the watchful eye of her mother, she “fantasized incessantly about escaping to faraway places.” Amanda Fin grew up in New Jersey where she watched Sinbad movies and kept a packed bag of clothes and cookies under her bed. Taking its cue from literature, lunar explorations and the human need for adventure, *The Trottle Sink* illustrates the universal desire to break out and the thrill of the getaway. With a potato as its protagonist, the video also explores the relationship of opposites: mundane and extraordinary, familiar and foreign, comedic and serious, the vast and the intimate.

Market Street Window

Joshua Pieper: *Untitled (shoe-gum)*

In his videos Joshua Pieper re-contextualizes the mundane through hyperbole and his own “quirky logic” to render the familiar strange. The seduction of the intensified over-statement of the video is set off kilter by the subtle off-beat sound and the viewer's personal relationship to the experience of stepping in a large wad of bright pink chewing gum. As the world becomes more virtual and adventures are experienced through games and movies,

Pieper reminds the viewer of the visceral and odd experience of the everyday occurrence.