



Above: Jon Rajkovich's "Nigh Tide," 2004
Below: Shannon Goff's "Phone," 2005

Scrap mettle

Summer show uses castoffs to create challenging art

by Glen Mannisto

You don't have to wait till the leaves fall in autumn, as is the tradition, to see the best art Susanne Hilberry Gallery has to offer. *Summer Pack 1*, the first exhibition in a two-part series curated collectively by gallery staff and local artists, has just ended. It was the best exhibition at Hilberry since the new space opened, and seems to promise a new engagement with young artists.

In part 1 of *Summer Pack*, three audacious young men were featured in a rigorously heady and imaginative exploration of new strategies for making art in a digital world. The featured artists — Ivin Ballen, Fabio Fernandez and Jon Rajkovich — have a few things in common. They each prize technique and have a high regard for the exploration of the identity of materials. They are also noticeably aware that contemporary art is at a crossroads between using materials resulting from contemporary technology and the refuse of our everyday lives.

Ivin Ballen is a master of appearances. His sculptures look as though they were made by a bored kid poking around in his parents' basement. Recyclable household items — such as toilet paper tubes, polystyrene takeout containers, plastic milk jugs and water bottles — are fastened to or embedded within what appear to be makeshift cardboard-and-duct-tape constructions. His stunningly ambivalent sculptures are actually made from plaster polymer and fiberglass, and painted with acrylic latex. The artist is keenly aware that his childlike creations suggest a certain naiveté, but ultimately he enjoys ambiguity, readily admitting that his pieces are "just fake boxes with tape on them."

They're "fake boxes" because Ballen's cardboard creations aren't cardboard and they're not childhood fantasies. Ballen actually uses his cardboard maquettes — constructing them as negative images — as molds for making sculptures from plaster polymer and fiberglass, and then he paints them with

acrylic latex. Each of Ballen's sculptures has its own quirky, illusive identity, but many of them hint at a narrative component. For instance, the three large works "Ply," "Mountain Landscape" and "Olive Sunrise" look like fantasy landscapes, while "Lilac-Chestnut" is a panoramic piece. These works also feature miniature paintings on them, illustrating their titles. The reducible "Fake Box" series also hints at metaphor. "Fake Box with Purple Tape" could be seen as a pre-Columbian figure and "Fake Box with Red Tape and White Square" might be a heraldic sign, perhaps a Norman image. But the largest and most enigmatic work, "Intermediary Coffin," with its multicolored markings and mountainous, Cézanne-like cubistic volume is a tour de force that keeps you guessing. Formalistically, Ballen's work is delightfully off-center and wiggly in its inscrutability. Although it compels a pedestrian reading, his art is a strong intellectual assertion of the elusiveness of representation and the multiple readings for artwork simulating reality.

Three of Jon Rajkovich's seamless hallucinatory sculptural works lie on the floor with, as if trying to escape their imprisonment, odd creatures finding their shape as they emerge from their bizarre composition of putrid colored latex and cast plastic. "Mongrel" is a psychotropic, acid-lemon-colored rectangle that becomes part dinosaur, part horse and part extraterrestrial. "Nigh Tide" and "Jolly Roll" also dominate the large plane of open space at the gallery with a peculiar

form and content that could not have been conceived without the simulated world of the computer as its forebear. "Jolly Roll" has a large mattress-like shape, tinted Pepto-Bismol pink. Out of that form emerges a set of stairs punctuated in the corner by a fragmented horse head. Also hallucinatory is the cotton candy blue "Nigh Tide," with a rocking horse head coming out of one corner and the cutaway section of an ear with skull cross section and ear canal coming out of another. Rajkovich's images seem like they take a page from a surrealist's notebook, but they are brilliantly narrative. From pure malleable form to the precise crafting of seemingly mythical icons, the story here is the life cycle of plastic. However, because of the

unsettling grotesquery, the viewer is unable to ascertain Rajkovich's final assessment: Is he or is he not a fan of this pervasive material? Is he a critic of how it affects popular imagination?

In his introduction to his collection of small wooden architectural models called "Tramp Series," Fabio Fernandez writes "I like clementines. For the past two years I have been saving clementine crates after enjoying their contents." In contrast to Ballen's and Rajkovich's work with high-tech materials, but, like them, concerned with the nature of the materials, Fernandez has constructed a simple but superbly humane collection of model buildings. In particular, by laminating together the gussets from the fruit boxes, he has constructed a delicate index of regional building types. His work seems all the more sincere because tangerines are grown in Spain, his parents' native land.

Fernandez works from drawings that he makes while riding in a car with "the luxury of someone else driving." He also says: "I don't make accurate architectural drawings. I'm not interested in infrastructural issues like drainage or electrical service. I'm interested in all the different types of buildings." Some of the models are clearly iconic, like the "saw-toothed building" from Detroit's auto factories, or various modernist contemporary commercial and residential buildings. Fernandez imbues his models with compassion and intelligence. The diminutive scale implies the sweetness of the fruit, as well as the compression of thoughtfulness and integrity of Fernandez's ideas and his overall concern with the fragile nature of the material world.

The second *Summer Pack* show offers an equally exciting cadre of artists. Matthew Blake's collaged constructions reference classical architectural friezes usually seen over the entryway of temples. Composed of found or "rescued" objects — toy soldiers, computer boards, model airplanes, action figures and other plastic figurines — they conjure a combustible narration of contemporary times told through a collage of detritus of everyday culture.

In a similar confrontation with everyday life, Shannon Goff parodies the world of kitchen appliances with humorously grotesque, marvelously crafted ceramic kitchen tools. The cartoons of a blender, an espresso maker, a grater, waffle iron and hand juicer are playfully color-coded according to their function. Most exciting is her almost-to-scale cardboard model of the iconic Bell 47 personal helicopter, which, in Goff's vision, translates as a personal appliance.

With accomplished and precise negotiation, Mitch Cope's investigative graphite drawings of urban and suburban landscapes and Mona Shahid's sensuous encaustic portraits of intimate friends are alarming portrayals of public and private life. Cope's

cameo-like scenarios set at parking lots, factories and strip malls offer a sense of domestic intimacy amid urban decay, rivaling Rackstraw Downe's inventory of American landscapes. Shahid's large-scale portraits, submerged in the palpable medium of encaustic wax and resin, express a lyrical and even awkward vulnerability.

Summer Pack 1 and *2* have turned the usually tepid group show of summer into one of this year's highlights.

Summer Pack 2 runs through Sept. 10 at Susanne Hilberry Gallery, 700 Livernois St., Ferndale; 248-541-4700.

Glen Mannisto writes about art for *Metro Times*. Send comments to letters@metrotimes.com.

