

BUT IS IT ART?

Without a broad audience, contemporary art establishes a foothold in Eugene

A video circulating on YouTube shows a curator, Aram Moshayedi, at LA's Hammer Museum introducing actors Will Ferrell and Joel McHale to a contemporary art exhibit, "Stories of Almost Everyone," which runs at the museum through May 6.

Included among the works in the show are a pile of shoes, a pair of socks and a large stack of mail, which is actual mail to the museum that has been redirected to a spot on the floor for the duration of the show.

According to the Hammer, the exhibit is about "the willingness to believe the stories that are conveyed by works of contemporary art."

The video with Ferrell and McHale touring the exhibit is not the goofy take I expected it to be. The actors look like they're honestly trying to understand why these mundane objects are considered art.

At one point, after looking at Kasper Bosmans' "George IV Kilt Hose, 2017" — a pair of red-and-white plaid socks that seem haphazardly laid out on the floor but may, in fact, have taken hours or even days to arrange — Ferrell wonders, "Time well spent — or not?"

He isn't trying to be funny. In fact, he seems to be trying to ask the question with as much finesse as possible.

The video has gotten a lot of attention because it illustrates perfectly the gap that exists between how the art world — museums, artists, educators, funding agencies — views art versus how the rest of society sees it.

In my art review last week ("Spring Forth," 4/12) I described Maddison Colvin's photography of leaves and plants in relation to the idea that it's difficult to represent nature accurately without changing it in some way.

Colvin's photographs are works of "contemporary art," a phrase that seems to refer to art currently being made, but is actually a genre or subset of the larger art world.

Contemporary art is aligned with the tradition of conceptual art — art that emphasizes ideas. If you're willing to go along with the artist's statement (the ideas that led her to produce her images), then you will look for, and perhaps see, the problem of representation while looking at her photographs.

Courtney Stubbett founded Eugene Contemporary Art because, he says, he thought Eugene lacked venues that represented art in this genre.

Contemporary artists, many of whom graduated from art programs at the University of Oregon, felt left out of the scene here — perhaps felt the gap illustrated by Ferrell's question — and have found alternate venues, whether permanent or temporary, to exhibit their work. They are hoping this signals the beginning of a burgeoning contemporary art scene.

Maddison Colvin is one of the artists who helps run Tropical Contemporary, an art collective and contemporary art space in Eugene. Both times I went to Tropical Contemporary, in February and in April, Colvin was sitting the gallery space (as well babysitting her infant). In addition to helping run the collective and making art, Colvin teaches at Linn-Benton Community College.

The first time I visited Tropical Contemporary it was to see "Slipstream," an exhibition by Hannah Newman. "Slipstream" was a one-weekend event held in February that incorporated text messages, sound and videos. The videos projected in a dimly lit room made for a dream-like cloud experience. The exhibition provided a truly engaging interaction for visitors.

I thought it was a beautiful show and said so, but then asked: "How do you sell a work of art like this?" Colvin's answer was that selling art was not a priority at Tropical Contemporary.

Selling may not be on the agenda, though funding is still necessary. Tropical Contemporary, which began as a nomadic group exhibiting in people's homes, empty office

spaces and moving trucks, is now permanently located at 1120 Bailey Hill Road, No. 11, and is supported this year by the Precipice Fund.

Ditch Projects, the other contemporary artist-run space in the area, is located in Springfield at 303 S. 5th Avenue, No. 165, and has also been supported by the Precipice Fund. The Precipice Fund seeks to promote projects that are often "... informal, anti-institutional, serious, and intentionally nebulous."

"Intentionally nebulous" may not seem like a desirable goal, but art that is simple or easy to understand is often interpreted by experts and collectors as lacking in substance or too commercial.

Sculptor Sun Eun Park's exhibit "Happy Funeral" showing in April at Tropical Contemporary is, as her title suggests, both happy and serious. Her numerous sculptures — miniature assemblages representing lives well lived — are strangely moving.

I asked a woman at the show's opening, a local painter, what she thought of Park's work. She said she liked it because she couldn't take it in all at once. In other words, Park's work wasn't simple.

Ditch Projects, opened in 2008, is an "artist-run studio, installation and performance space." It and Tropical Contemporary both refer to themselves as "spaces" rather than "galleries." What's the difference between a space and a gallery?

A space, I suspect, is "intentionally nebulous." Artwork is exhibited in a gallery, but anything can happen in a space. Spaces are for happenings and experiences.

Contemporary artists sometimes refer to their art as being performed rather than made. Whatever is performed at Ditch Projects happens just one day a week for four hours, on Saturdays from noon to 4 pm. This scarcity of hours may reflect that the gallery is run largely by art instructors or students who work or study.

When I went to Ditch Projects, there was just one other car in front and the door was slightly ajar. It looked like a warehouse or someone's storage unit — not a place to enter uninvited. But once inside, I found a well-maintained space with high ceilings and white walls.

At Tropical Contemporary an artist's work may be up for as long as a month or as short as one day. It is also located within an industrial complex. If it's open, you'll know because there's a pink arrow pointing to it out front.

Eugene Contemporary Art is now in the same nomadic situation as Tropical Contemporary once was, though it has established a relationship with Slightly Coffee Roasters, formerly Barn Light East, to present its artists. ECA has a series of exhibitions underway at Slightly this year, in April showing photographs by Colvin as well as painting assemblages by Lillian Almeida.

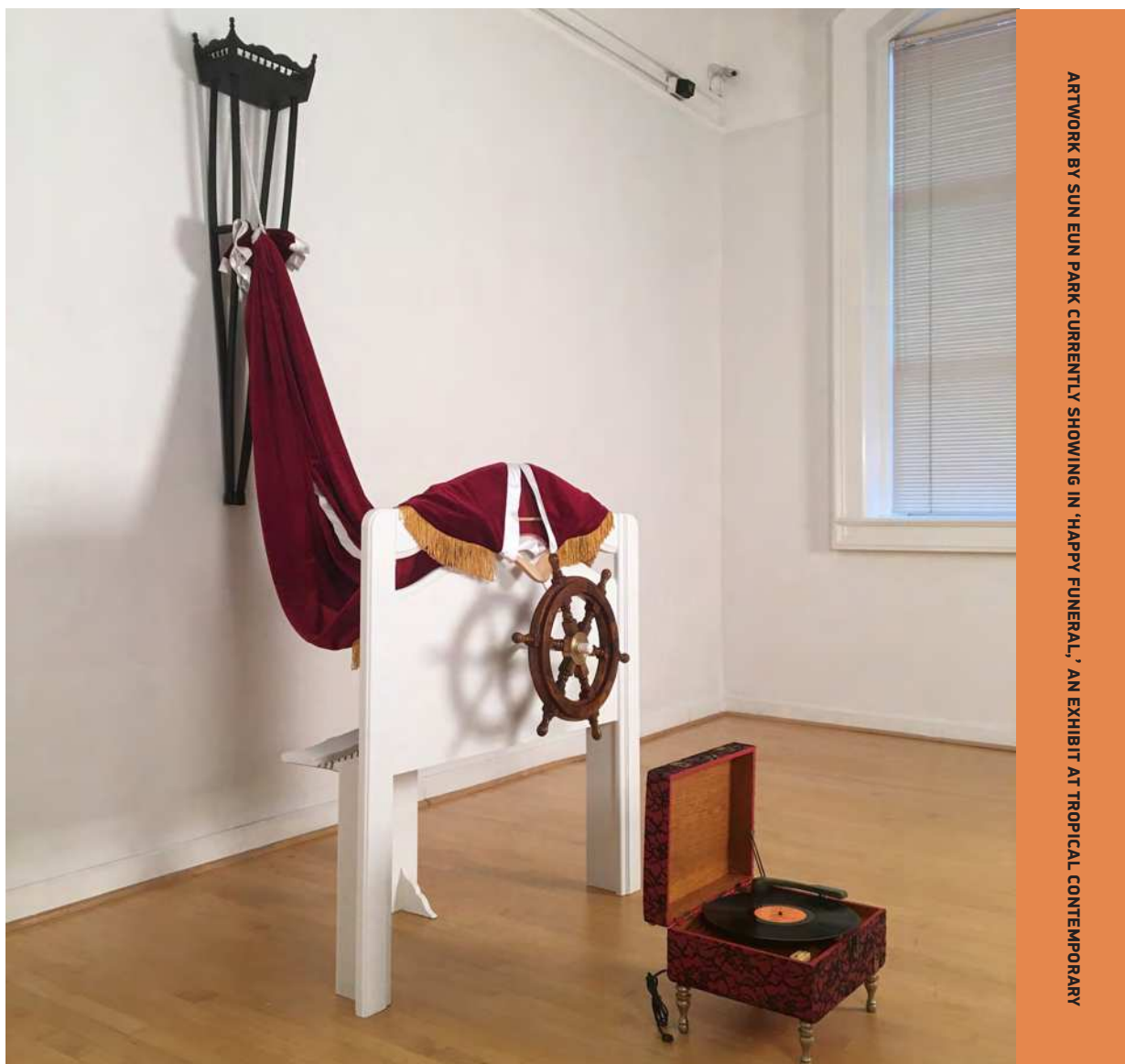
Slightly Coffee Roasters is named after Slightly, one of the Lost Boys from Peter Pan's Neverland, and is co-owned by Thomas Pettus-Czar, who majored in art history and interned in Venice at the Peggy Guggenheim Museum. Pettus-Czar is also a committee member on the 20x21 Eugene Mural Project.

Benjamin Terrell, artist and owner of Epic Seconds on 11th Avenue in Eugene, says businesses could lead the way for interesting alternate art spaces in Eugene. They are not constrained by the politics of, say, grant writing, or the need to sell art for their business to survive, and are therefore free to open up their wall space however they see fit.

Terrell, who has had three exhibits at Barn Light East/Slightly, is creating an upstairs loft at his store Epic Seconds, which will host record vendors and exhibitions. He has four artists lined up whose work will coincide with the interests of his clientele — a community of people who gather to browse, exchange, buy and discuss music, records, games and movies.

Terrell's upstairs exhibition space will open April 21, Record Store Day.

The cluttered atmosphere of Epic Seconds may seem a far cry from the empty spaces of Ditch Projects or Tropical Contemporary, but it shares with them, as does Slightly Coffee Roasters, the desire to promulgate art that may otherwise not have a venue in Eugene. ■



ARTWORK BY SUN EUN PARK CURRENTLY SHOWING IN 'HAPPY FUNERAL,' AN EXHIBIT AT TROPICAL CONTEMPORARY