

Shapeshifter (Review)

Local and regional shapeshifters artfully manipulate ordinary resources

By Jane Durrell

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In Country Club's current group show, *Shapeshifter*, much of the work is flat-out beautiful, while what isn't is still rewarding because it gives you plenty to think about.

What's beautiful is always a personal call, but who wouldn't find Chris Radtke's shimmering take on her own twinned form a splendid sight? Personal space and psychological space are suggested in her "Lax," which consists of two lengths of crumpled bronze-wire mesh, modeled apparently on her own dimensions, each held in shape with long red staples

like stitches. The two pieces don't move but movement is implied, a nervous glimmer that says change is constant.

Radtke's other work in the show, "Ghost (Wall)," does include movement of a (barely) perceptible nature. The ghosts of the wall, two-foot cubes outlined by white man-made materials, sink a little as time progresses, responding to gravity's pull, just as do we. If you want to read responses to minimalist artists like Donald Judd into all this, that's fine, but it stands competently on its own.

Radtke is one of three Louisville artists included in this exhibition, along with three Cincinnati artists and a New Yorker. Cincinnati's Anthony Luensman is caught up in the exploration of materials, a search that produced "Fractures (green)," a mesmerizing construction of silvery and green fibers that form a screen slightly in front of a white ground and that cast shadows that become part of the work. Undeniably beautiful. He's also represented by a pale, elegant, funny embossed silkscreen (edition of 15) that carries its title straight across the shadowed silhouette of a traditional bedstead: "AHEADBOARDFORABOREDHEAD."

Jimmy Baker, also of Cincinnati, shows a pair of loosely linked oil paintings. "Saber" records the beams of floodlights against a shiny black sky, like a defiant human thrust, countered in "Sunspot Activity" by the careless inhumanity of sunlight in flux. Here and in his "Ravens Rock (Site R)," he challenges the viewer to look beyond the ostensible subject matter.

Baker's works are scrupulously produced but less interesting to me than the quirky takes of Keith Benjamin, a Cincinnati sculptor, who has incorporated a prestige wood - walnut - into his cardboard dreams. Benjamin has been making astonishing things out of old cereal boxes and the like for years, but now is carving shapes to be enhanced by cardboard.

In "huck," a cardboard raft is precariously balanced on a walnut shore. "Mine" has an ominous, door-like opening to a walnut mine shaft.

Neat, slender cardboard sticks outline a house on a wooden lawn in “two story,” and “gilligan” (pictured) is a walnut island with a cardboard pier to nowhere. Both Baker and Benjamin want us to enjoy what’s at hand but to think past the immediate subject matter. Where this takes you is not necessarily charted.

Letitia Quesenberry’s works are tantalizingly incorporeal. Although these pieces all date from 2009, their basis is a series of Polaroid self-portraits the Louisville artist made over a period of 60 consecutive days in 2003. Making art can sometimes seem like sleight-of-hand, as when Quesenberry transfers the emulsion from those photographs onto aluminum surfaces for a series called “peeled.” Delicately balanced between abstraction and representation, these works tickle perception with hints and shadows and slight suggestions.

In one of the more defined pieces we see a face arbitrarily cropped at ears and forehead; another is the vaguest of figures seen from the waist up and another limits the ephemeral person to head and shoulders. Still another shows just her feet and jeans-covered ankles. The clearest, most corporeal element is at the far right, at the end if we follow our automatic inclination to read from left to right. It shows the artist’s hand.

Also requiring a second (or third or fourth) look is Stephen Irwin’s “Still Lives,” in which what appears to be a line of classical-vase shapes sprayed on the wall turns out to incorporate reverse images. Find the profiles or other body parts. Irwin mines vintage pornography to produce smooth art with a societal sting.

Beth Campbell, the New Yorker in this mix, is represented by two of my favorite pieces in the show. Hanging from the ceiling like chandeliers that have lost their function, they are shown eye-level — you have to walk around them — and consist of steel and copper wires of descending thickness, five or six different widths to each piece, joined so that air movement animates them. Multiplicity of choice is implied, along with the suggestion of narrowing options as the diameters of the wires diminish. Inevitably, each path ends.

The exhibition, smart and current (everything is 2009 or 2010), is co-curated by Matt Distel, Country Club director, and Linda Schwartz, now consultant to the gallery. Schwartz’s Fourth Street gallery closed in 2004 and still is missed. She has continued her relationship with local artists but some of her work in the interim has been in Louisville, resulting in that city’s representation in this show.

Distel and Schwartz have put together an exhibition that resonates from artist to artist and is a pleasure to explore. Along with *Shapeshifter*, the gallery is showing a small solo exhibition of work by Paul Coors, co-founder of the late but not forgotten Publico Gallery in Over-the-Rhine.

SHAPESHIFTER continues through April 10 at Country Club Gallery in Oakley. Get show and gallery details [here](#).