

Rewiring art the 'Robot' way

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The Robot Art Gallery is blurring the line between ad design and traditional gallery fare. Consider the paradigm shift refreshing and even overdue.

Blame Andy Warhol. Or better yet, venerate him for being the first to blur the division that kept creative ad dynamos and studio artists in separate strata. Now thank the Robot Art Gallery for finishing what the Campbell Soup-inspired luminary started.

The southtown neighbor may be one of a growing number of galleries that revel in the cathartic bliss of the King William district, but its walls and pedestals display what may be the very natural and already successful trend in contemporary art.

"I moved from Chicago and I really couldn't wait to move my gallery to southtown," said Lara August, owner of the Robot Art Gallery. "It is the most highly concentrated place in the city with contemporary art. [Our gallery] showed emerging artists that inspired our design firm. It was like there was a hybrid between an art gallery and design business and that brought the two areas closer together to show how they relate to one another."

Following its official opening in 2002 and the move to a new location, the 1500 square foot loft space has already displayed everything from photo exhibits in conjunction with famed Fotoseptiembre to area sculptures. *Photo-Design: Where Image and Design Meet*, its latest exhibit which runs until October 31, combined the work of Kevin Rayhons, Stephanie Rubiano and Andrew Watson. Watson, who also works as a curator and designer at Robot Art, is just one member of the creative think tank.

Its work? To display completely original art which is as comfortable with product placement as it is with inclusion in any permanent collection. Elements from pop culture and surreal undercurrents permeate prints from artists like Rubiano. Like any good marketing firm, where there is magnetic design, partnerships are not far behind. Local businesses and retail stores have taken up selling original work much to the delight of Robot Art and artists alike.

"Moving forward, we really want to work with national and international figures in the design community," August continued. "Specifically, we really want to raise their work to a level where they begin to see themselves as artists. Graphic designers, textile designers, printmakers and even product design will hopefully have their work be displayed in gallery setting which may be a new experience for them. I think many artists are put into a very commercial role very early on in their career."

The leap from the pop culture fodder to genuine works of art may not be the chasm it once was. In many cases, it is the original work of graphic designers that most see rather than the collection of formal art galleries. The case is getting much harder to make that designers have not staked their claim on what is visually intriguing to the general public. In many ways, traditional art has the same goal with less exposure.

According to August, mass production of an original design does not take away from the integrity or artistic training behind it—the trick is to get such recognition and not to worry about



"Oh My" by Stephanie Rubiano (Photo/courtesy)



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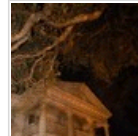
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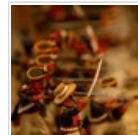
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compartmentalizing a visually stimulating concept.

“The shows I have curated seems to have a theme that runs through the entire body of work,” said Andrew Watson, a designer and artist at Robot Art Gallery. “Even though the artists in our current show have different sensibilities, the foundation of the work is very similar. We were all artists that came from a graphic element. Sometimes the line between commercial art and art is very blurred.”

To its credit, Robot Art has walked along, straddled and even run through the boundary of what has been expected from southtown galleries. *Photo-Design: Where Image and Design Meet* proves once again that “contemporary art” is not a term easily defined. Thus, it begs the existential question of whether it even needs to be.

“There are many people who have made that transition to commercial art even though they have professional artistic training. Commercial artists, also, have branched out and done personal work that has the sensibilities not intended for a client,” said Watson.

Whatever title it may hold, the Robot Art Gallery just calls it riveting and inspirational. For as muddled as the design world has become since Warhol made Tomato Soup a movement, deconstructing art has only led to more questions. Perhaps this time it should yield appreciation that comes only from our gut instinct.

More information is available at www.robotartgallery.com.

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