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ART REVIEW

Catching the Imagination in Language and Imagery

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Nobu Fukui *Vividly Tantalizing*, 2007, Mixed media over panel, 72 x 96 in.

If you can overlook the limitations of the Molloy College Art Gallery, a hallway in an administrative building where paintings are occasionally hung, there is a terrific selection of works in “Words Become Pictures.” It is a group show looking at the use of words in contemporary art, especially painting, sometimes to enhance the viewer’s understanding and sometimes as purely abstract visual symbols.

It is an interesting idea, if not a terribly original one. From the early 20th-century paintings of Picasso and Braque through to contemporary creations by conceptual artists, written language has been a staple in art. But this show concentrates on a particular aspect — the marrying of language and imagery taken from popular culture. So while this show is about the use of language in contemporary art, it is also about appropriation.

Marcus Kenney appropriates canceled checks, newspaper print, glossy magazine images, antique wallpaper and other paper products to create lively, cartoon-like collage paintings of playground scenes. Together they provide a colorful meditation on our throwaway society, but also, perhaps, a commentary on the loss of childhood innocence in a world divided by sectarian conflicts. In one painting a little boy does battle in

the schoolyard holding a sword and shield emblazoned with an image of Jesus holding a lamb.

Similarly, Nobu Fukui creates collage paintings with myriad materials, including beads, string, ink, oil paint and popular cultural imagery culled from old newspapers and magazines, including art magazines. In fact, some works are so densely layered that they are a bit like bubbling caldrons of imagery. It is part Pop Art, part potpourri, though the overall choice and arrangement of the materials always seems purposeful.

Language has greater prominence in artworks by Greg Edmondson, Richard Sigmund, Jim Torok and Tjorg Douglas Beer, a core group of artists who best embody the theme of the show. Distinctions between form and content blur in Mr. Edmondson’s figure studies made of meandering spirals of text, the end result calling to mind Leonardo da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man. Mr. Sigmund transforms letters and words into abstract shapes, while Mr. Beer likes to doodle on his canvases.

More conventionally, Mr. Torok combines words and images to create personal illustrations, reminiscent of comic books, that tell a story. Many of them are based on events in the artist’s life, like his daily routine working in the studio or the experience of traveling by car back to his childhood home in Indiana. Here language and images work together on the page to enhance our understanding of a complex set of events.

Although this capsule survey only scratches the surface of contemporary artists using text, it points up the ways in which traditional distinctions between art forms have begun to shatter at the edges. Are Mr. Torok’s works paintings or comic illustrations? How do we define Mr. Fukui’s painterly collages? The appearance of words in art is more than just decorative experimentation. It can be a radical act.

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