

CAC Exhibit Pushes Back Against Museum's Architecture

Mara Seda-Reeder

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"When people ask me what are my influences, they're ghosts and magic," artist and curator Michael Stillion said during a recent visit to his studio in Evanston.

So you can be sure that Stillion, a preparator and senior crew member at the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC), hid at least one ghost in his debut curatorial endeavor, *Shall I tell you the secret of the whole world?* Painting, Parody and Disguise, which is currently on view on the second level of the aforementioned notoriously challenging Zaha Hadid-designed building.

The CAC's newest curator, Steven Matijcio, says he was looking for a way to "push back in a playful way" against Hadid's antagonistic architecture, and to "pull out from the shadows the object as a gesture of both resistance and revelation" — particularly regarding the architect's dismissal of painting as an obsolete medium. So after seeing an exhibition of Stillion's work at Phyllis Weston Gallery last year, Matijcio says, "I was immediately drawn to Michael's work because he celebrates this delirious disguise."

Stillion got a phone call from Matijcio a few months later inviting him to curate a show with a paradigm of engaging Cincinnati-related artists. With help from his experience installing countless other artists' work within that same space, and seen through the filter of his own aesthetic voice, Stillion makes a case for painting as a relevant, ever-evolving medium in contemporary art.

"Working at the CAC for so long, I started getting ideas for how to work the space," Stillion says. "I always have ideas for artists to show; I was sort of daydreaming about what could be arranged in that space."

And Stillion purposefully arranged the pieces throughout the awkward space to acknowledge and visually lay claim over every corner, wall and pillar of the gallery — using the work of the 11 participating artists to set up a kind of Rube Goldberg machine, which demonstrates the various paths, processes and intricate curiosities that can result from painting.

What's so compelling about *Shall I tell you the secret of the whole world?* is that Stillion's formalist and philosophical intents as an artist — a sleight-of-hand misdirection and accompanying metaphorical puff of smoke, masking a playful jab to your funnybone — are also made visible in his selection and arrangement of artwork as a curator.

Stillion had less than six months to arrange the exhibition so he began with his top picks, and the first artist he called was Tony Tasset. "I knew once I had him," Stillion says, "I figured everyone else would say sure."

They did. And Tasset's life-size sculptural "Bear" is the first piece one encounters when entering the exhibition. Using Tasset's brown cartoon-like bear with eyes colorfully gouged-out to stare visitors down as they enter the gallery, Stillion sets up a provocative binary between viewer and artwork, engaging viewers in a good humored albeit slightly off-putting act of looking.

These teetering binaries of push and pull, humor and unease, collapse and explosion are part of Stillion's visual language and the painter uses both his own work and that of others to address the particular challenges of the space.

Stillion enlisted Cincinnati-based sculptor Sarah Blyth-Stephens to do an onsite installation of her poured-cement sculptures around the two formidable concrete pillars in the gallery. The resulting pieces have the immediate gestural expression of a Lynda Benglis poured-latex piece, but the scale and vertical orientation of Blyth-Stephens' fingerlike extensions of wispy-thin white gypsum make them appear simultaneously delicate and imposing.

The fact that these two sculptures look like hands is perhaps no coincidence. “I’m always trying to figure out a way to get the figure out of my paintings,” Stillion says. And for the past few years, he’s painted cloaked references to the figure that — despite a lack of face or sometimes natural anatomy — often include a literal sleight of hand, sending the viewer on a wild goose chase for a discernable narrative.

The artist/curator included two of his own paintings, “Push” and “Elbow,” which depict figures with little more anatomical clues than a foot and hand, and that acknowledge the edge of Stillion’s canvas. As a curator, he placed both a little too close for comfort against the corners of Hadid’s daunting art space — literally poking at the massive architectural structures as if to say, “so what?”

Stillion’s bag of tricks is full — his work is both smart and well-crafted. Let’s hope that Matijcio and his peers continue to give Cincinnati artists these kind of generous and transformative opportunities for artistic expression.