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L. Kent Wolgamott: Chicago artists look at abstraction in Elder Gallery show

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Ask artists to define abstraction verbally and you wind up with a poster full of words -- some academic, some philosophical, some humorous and some kind of baffling.

Ask them to do so visually, and you get a gallery full of paintings, drawings, prints, collages, sculpture and photography -- pieces that are, largely, "non-objective," another term for non-representational art, aka abstraction.

That art can be found in Nebraska Wesleyan University's Elder Gallery through Nov. 23 in an exhibition titled "Rocket Run: Abstractions from Chicago."

Organized by artist Alexander Herzog, the show is made up of 61 objects from 61 artists and covers the range of abstraction from the gestural works rooted in midcentury abstract expressionism to hard-edged geometric pieces, works that suggest representation, and multiple media pieces that become abstract via their shapes.

Among the AE-rooted pieces are Darrel Roberts' small, thickly layered oil "ChawriBazaar (Delhi)," Ron Ewart's "La saison de l'enfer #7," a roiling concoction of organic-looking green and yellow ochre swatches that brings to mind Jackson Pollock's surrealist-influenced work prior to his drip paintings, and John Opera's "Equivalent 01," an exploration in blue with subtle gradations in the color.

Hard-edged works include Geoffrey Todd Smith's "Missionary Magician," an enamel, gouache and ink piece that's a pattern of circles, Matt Irie's "Could Caucasians," with its repeating interlocked tubes and Andrew Falkowski's



This untitled acrylic on paper collage by Dan Devening is part of "Rocket Run: Abstractions from Chicago" on view at Nebraska Wesleyan University's Elder Gallery.

“Synechdoche (1-3),” a triptych of small panels covered with a grid of parallelograms.

George Liebert’s large acrylic “Summer,” covered with green, yellow and dark blue slashes on its lower two-thirds and lighter blue above, suggests a forested landscape with a pond or river -- a classic bit of abstraction making reference to the real world.

Alexander Herzog’s “Shletz” takes that notion a step further, replicating a weaving that’s coming apart with black and white lines.

The unusual material extends from Josh Reames’ untitled sculptural piece that looks like a snowflake cut out of wood, and Robert Burnier’s “lota,” a pieced of folded aluminum painted with primer, to Titus Dawson’s innovative gold painting on faux fur that looks like an aerial view of a mountainous area, and Judy Ledgerwood’s “Blasted Painting,” a large, brightly colored urethane foam painting that is very similar to the “gunk” work of Omaha’s Colin Smith.

Appropriate to the “define abstraction” show thesis, there are a few objects that raise questions that aren’t easily answered.

Eric Lebofsky’s “Victory,” an acrylic, tempera and ink on canvas that’s covered with comic-style balloons filled with words, such as “cogent” and “totalmetry,” and phrases, such as “The Truth is in the Details,” asks can readable text be abstract?

Kelly Kaczynski’s “Julia sitting,” a photograph of a nude woman that’s broken apart by wooden planes and reflections contains a pair of queries -- can something figurative also be abstract? Is photography of identifiable objects abstract in any sense?

And Eric Ruschman’s “Congratulations! Everything’s All Right!” an enamel on panel wall piece, is a shape -- the bottom half of an H. Can something that simple be abstract?

My answers to those questions are maybe, yes, yes and yes. But views will vary -- and the show succeeds by stimulating those thoughts and discussion.

Those questions come to mind, in part, because the smartly displayed “Rocket Run” is hung with no labels whatsoever. Only numbers identify the individual works -- a 10-page checklist provides the names and titles if a visitor wants to see them.

And the text from the artists is found on posters stacked on a large pedestal in one of the gallery spaces. Those who come to Elder Gallery for the show can take a poster home and read what the artists say about abstraction -- a collection of short takes that is as stimulating as the objects they created.