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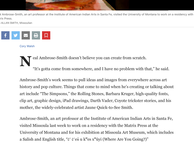
EDITOR'S PICK

Neal Ambrose-Smith's omnivorous way of making art

Cory Walsh 5 hrs ago 0



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Neal Ambrose-Smith, an art professor at the University of Montana Dillon, hosts the university of Montana's work as a residency with the Maria Press.
JESSICA DARTY, Missoulian

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The show includes mixed media prints, paintings and a floor-to-ceiling neon installation and draws on abstract painting, text, found imagery, and pop culture. They address a sense of confusion and entrence into unknown territory, sometimes with direct references to Star Trek.

"You see a lot of the same repeated imagery," said Brandon Reintjes, the MAM's senior curator. He thinks the show has the feel of an exhibition with information from hundreds of sources.

The exhibition works were all made after the 2016 election and reflect his observations. Ambrose-Smith also turns under Obama, he "would be decided by it."

The title given, "1' r'ri ii ii'ii'ii'ii (Where Are You Going?)" stretches floor to ceiling, to text tall and ty fest wide. It's like an abstract drawing transferred into neon — four lines in red, yellow, green and purple loop around a wooden backdrop. Set to a timer, they brighten and dim in sequence, eventually leaving only green.

"I've been practicing my scribbling like crazy, because I can't scribble," he said. As he worked on it, he began to see its content as cultures and separation.

"Like those are 36-time strips, continuous loops with each color connected to itself and not really mixing in much with anything else," he said. "And the idea that there's no escape. In this country, we can't escape each other, we have to deal with each other, so why can't we deal with each other?"

While none at close range might seem overwhelming, he's happy that the effect is pleasant and somewhat hypnotic. It's a place that drows you to want to sit on the bench and soak it in.

"It's really soothing. That changing light is like the sun coming through the leaves and the trees, how it moves through the sky ... things are always changing," he said.

Paintings

The prints and paintings are united by repeated motifs. Lewis Carroll's Alice has in some cases seemingly merged into a Rabbit characters as well. He does love scribbles, too. The squiggles in the neon sculpture are also in the paintings. It's sometimes difficult to tell whether imagery is appropriated or only feels that way, said John Caldwell, the MAM's senior curator. There's a sense that he's throwing in "everything he knows" and everything he's learned about.

In one of the larger paintings, "Get in the Relief Pod," (3 feet by 8 feet) the Bluedrip Enterprise battles through a series of imagery — abstract brushwork, a stash of what could be lipitopogrh drawings, all swirling around in one majority with what looks like vintage imagery of a headless, vintage trailers, clothing items, a clown face and more.

The edges of the canvases are covered with text he's culled from SlyStud magazine, alternating light and dark in a long run-on sentence — "all art is fake," "the politics of instability", "nonsyl jacks," "high brightness means high impact," "get in the relief pod," and so and on.

Blueblight painter and 3D gaggles aren't that common at the MAM, but Ambrose-Smith wanted to add an element of excitement for kids who visit through the museum's Fifth-Grade Art Experiences, and when the lights are dimmed you see even more imagery loaded into the canvas.

In one of the show's large-scale prints, "The Story Teller," a hand-drawn Coyote is seated in a chair, dressed in a suit, legs crossed, pipe in hand. Appropriated images of trailer houses, headdresses, clothes irons, a clown and more orbit from like an amoeba behind. Throw on the glasses and it all seems to hover over the bright galactic background.

The smaller-format paintings have more thickly rendered characters and hand lettering. "If I Have to Listen to the Sons Shut Mom Time," centers on a Coyote/cricketer with crickets in its pupils, like a character in a Warner Brothers cartoon hypnotized. The bewildered creature appears submerged in text in a white and red pool. Chaotic red brushwork looms above like ominous weather. (For context and speculation's sake, the piece is from 2019.)

Always creating

Ambrose-Smith's mother is Jamie Quirk-to-See Smith, a member of the CSKT from the Flathead Reservation. She finds ground for Indigenous artists and women artists starting in the 1970s, not only through her own work but curation. She's also the first Native painter whose work was purchased by the National Gallery of Art.

Ambrose-Smith said that when his mother was finishing her bachelor's degree, they couldn't afford child care, so he went to art classes with her and followed along. "I took ceramics, I was in painting, I was in drawing, and you know, I just sat there and did what everyone else was doing," he said.

He also worked with her on her archives and in her studio. Their house was a stopover for innovative artists like Joe Feddersen (Colville) and more, and her work has influenced his thinking and imagery as well.

All last week, Ambrose-Smith was at UM working on prints. The crew included printmaking professor James Bailey and Jason Clark, a 3D technician and adjunct printmaking professor, and a team of UM students, who will all share the portfolio of prints when they're done.

The prints are for use with a grant from the Warhol Foundation for Marfa and the museum to fund projects like this. Prior visiting artists through the grant include Sara Bershtein, Lillian Pitt, Molly Murphy-Adams, Melanie Yazzie, John Hitchcock, Duane Slick and more.

In a different take on the theme, Coyote's mask bears a parted mouth. He saw it on the wall of the UM print studio — at first he thought it might be from the Rocky Horror Show, but it's not. It almost could be, though. Or it might call to mind the Rolling Stones' lips logo.

He's not sure where it came from, only that he liked the way it looked on the print.

"There has to be a bit of fearlessness when you're making work, and so working here with the students is really great because they ... could see it in action, like how it happens," he said.

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