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Mystery and Obscurity: An Insight into University Student

In this exhibition review, I have decided to explore the School of Art and Design 2023 Juried Student Exhibition in the Joann Cole Mitte (JCM) Building. Regarding the overall mission statement of the exhibit, the online description explains that this is an annual juried competition that celebrates the distinguished work of students enrolled in the School of Art and Design at Texas State University. I believe this temporary exhibition is important because it allows the community to view the variety and range of Texas State students, who will soon be the future of art within our community. As a Texas State student, walking into the gallery I was completely in awe of the creativity that my fellow Texas State students were capable of expressing through their art. The first thing I noticed about this exhibit is that the exhibit, which is a common white cubical design, was the several diverse artistic forms and designs. For example, there is oil and acrylic on canvas, photography, wood works and carvings, ceramic castings, and models, metal works, and even video art. I was pleased to see the diversity of artistic paths that Texas State students practiced. I was almost overwhelmed by the assortment of different styles of design within the gallery. This is mainly due to the popular preconceived notion that art galleries normally only consist of the canvas, and seeing diversity in styles was quite rare. However, I have to admit, I fell victim to this thought. When I walked into the gallery, I was prepared to see canvas after canvas hanging on the wall, but now I am glad that this was not the case. From the moment I walked into the gallery and viewed the pieces, I was constantly shocked and unprepared for the objects in that room.

In my Exhibition Review, I will focus on the form and content, analysis, meaning, judgment, and criteria of certain artworks created by Texas State students and the overall layout of the exhibit itself that create an eerie and mysterious yet engaging and entertaining atmosphere.

**FIRST PIECE**

The gallery consists of two rooms that are connected by a doorway. I first entered the room on the right side, and one art piece immediately caught my attention. The piece, *Make Amends*, by Michelle Delgado consists of mixed media on a panel. Immediately after viewing this artwork, one is presented with a state of confusion, due to the fact that it is nearly impossible to successfully identify one object. The only possible object that I was able to identify and perhaps name, was an eye looking upward. However, even now I am unsure if that is correct because every shape, color, and feature creates a state of confusion for the viewing audience. If I had to use one word to describe this artwork, I would use “anxiety.” After examining the piece, I was instantly filled with a state of anxiety and instability/uncertainty. However, I am certain that this is the purpose of the art, to display to the audience an eerie and worry-filled environment. I believe as a university student, anxiety and unease are a constant and common emotional state of mind for students. When other Texas State students view this piece, I am almost certain they relate to or possibly understand the reasoning behind the artist's motivation to create this artwork. The artist successfully represents this notion with an element of mixed mediums. Some of the identifiable components include fabric, glass, cardboard, paper, paint, etc. The several components consisting within the artwork produce a multi-layered idea of mystery and the unknown. I love this piece because I imagine that this artwork relates to other students of Texas State, whether they are fellow art students or are from any major/minor within the university. Stress and anxiety are common yet harmful emotional conditions that nearly every university student faces on a daily basis. With this artwork, the artist not only represents the emotional battle they and every student encounter but also provides reassurance to students that they are not alone when confronting these feelings.

**SECOND PIECE**

The next artwork that captured my attention was a video installation by Angel David Valdez Martinez called *Catch Up*. This piece consisted of several mysterious short videos that were repeated on a loop. One short section displayed an individual who was eating ketchup with a spoon in a kitchen setting. However, the individual was unsuccessful in consuming the ketchup because they were wearing a face mask over their mouth. This led to ketchup smeared all over their face and mask, yet they continued to try to force ketchup into their mouth. Although there was no information or context behind this part of the video artwork, one can assume that the message or idea reflects the situation of unknown and confusion the entire population felt when the global pandemic, COVID-19, took over. This can be inferred by the face mask the individual is wearing and the factor of acting out seemingly simple yet impossible tasks that every person faced during the pandemic. Two other sections of the video consisted of a dark room with nearly little to no light, with an unknown individual performing unknown tasks and actions. Due to the room that the individual is in being almost completely dark, little can be seen and therefore little can be understood. These two sections are only distinguishable because of the different locations and colors of the limited light in each video. These sections reflect an eerie and frightening sense due to the darkness and unidentifiable actions being performed by the unknown individuals, once again creating a mysterious environment. Another fragment of the video artwork involved the depiction of an individual’s two hands that are painting their nails with light blue color fingernail polish. The viewer watches the performance through what seems to be the nail painters view point of view, only seeing the hands and the reflection of the hand from a small mirror that is placed in front of the hands. However, the nail polish is not just on the individual’s nails, but also on their fingers and almost their entire hands. The person is spreading and covering their entire hand in the light blue nail polish. The nail painter’s motivations and reasoning behind their actions are completely unknown, which creates a mysterious and baffling reaction from the audience. This section leaves the viewers grasping for any understanding or possible explanation for this puzzling engagement. The fact that none of the videos contain any context, created an even more convincing state of mystery. After I watched video after video, I only became even more confused due to the unpredicted nature of each video. I had no idea what to expect next, and that is what made me obsessed with this piece. I felt that this video is just like life, you never know what mysterious and confusing situations you may face next in your future, but you have to try your best to make sense of the circumstance.

**THIRD PIECE**

Upon entering the left side of the exhibition gallery, I was immediately drawn to the left side of the wall due to the large lamb head ceramic that was hanging on the wall. *The Lamb / A Love Letter* by Davyn Ladera consists of ceramics, acrylic paint, gouache, and acrylic yarn. This haunting head depicts a white taxidermy lamb head with vibrant eyes. The eyes of the lamb create an eerie atmosphere when viewing this piece. The multi-colored ringed eyes make the lamb appear in a hypnotic and trance-like state. While the appearance of the lamb’s eyes generates a state of anxiety and uncomforting feeling, I believe that is the purpose of the work. The lamb’s eyes suggest the lamb is in a euphoric condition, gone from our reality due to the cartoon nature of the bright and vivid colors within the eyes. The cartoon nature of this artwork creates a sense of once innocent but now lost which can be inferred due to the decapitated head hanging from the wall. This piece creates the interpretation of the euphoric yet anxious emotions one may feel from their youth, but once reality takes hold, those feelings quickly decline with age. I was intrigued by the appearance of the lamb and its mysterious atmosphere. Although the artwork was an inanimate object, I viewed this piece from a little further than I normally do with artwork because I felt as if this object was going to jump out and scare me. The eerie nature of the artwork was so strong that I was cautious and even on edge when viewing the piece.

After losing interest in the lamb head, I was then drawn to the interesting layout of the platforms and the pieces that were on them in the middle of the gallery rooms.

**LAYOUT**

In each room, there were four white cubical platforms in the gallery. However, I was slightly confused about this feature the most because of the way they were all unsymmetrical and not evenly facing the same direction. Due to my previous knowledge of exhibition layouts, I was expecting a symmetric arrangement, however, I was wrong. Even though all these platforms were holding wonderful and amusing artworks created by the Texas State students, I was more focused on why the platforms were turned in odd and unmatching directions. The mysterious layout creates a state of confusion instead of just serving as a simple podium that holds artwork. Instead of having detailed accounts of the artworks, the only aspect I remember is asking myself why the platforms have angled in that direction and placed in that location. This leaves me questioning if the layout of the platforms was placed in an intentional or unintentional direction to create a sense of mystery in the exhibit.

Another feature of the platforms that created confusion was how the plaques were placed on the platforms. Instead of being on the top face of the platform where the plaque would have been next to the artwork, the informational plaques were placed on the side face of the cubical platform. I had to walk around the entire platform to find the plaque, I felt as if I was running in circles. Once again, these features took away from the main factors of the artwork and unintentionally created a confusing environment.

From the first room, I then migrated to the right-side gallery room. Once again, I began observing the wall artwork on the left side of the and worked my way around the room. After viewing the diverse artworks, I then noticed that the platforms in the middle of the room were once again, terribly placed. Like the room before, these cubicle platforms were facing all different directions and slightly unproportional.

Personally, I would have positioned these cubical stands to evenly and symmetrically face each other. I am unsure if these platforms/stands were purposely positioned in this layout, to create an engaging environment and conversation. If the gallery planned to purposely place these platforms in such a manner to create a mysterious and engaging, then they succeeded. However, I personally could not stand the layout, which made it difficult for me to focus on the artwork.

In conclusion, I focused on the form and content, analysis, meaning, judgment, and criteria of certain artworks created by Texas State students and the overall layout of the exhibit itself that create an eerie and mysterious yet engaging and entertaining atmosphere. I believe that through the gallery’s artworks, particularly *The Lamb / A Love Letter, Catch Up,* and *Make Amends*, a mysterious and engaging atmosphere was perfectly established. I believe that this gallery is significant for the general public and non-art major students because it allows individuals an insight into the lives, thoughts, and emotions of college students, and the mysterious forces behind these artists' works. This exhibition allows individuals to connect or provide sympathy for these emerging artists. I adored this exhibition and the artists, and I hope to see more similar to it in the near future.