Capital City Arts Initiative

The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present New Crop 2016, *an exhibition by MFA candidates from Sierra Nevada College and the University of Nevada, Reno: Tom Drakulich, Mahsan Ghazianzad, Quynh Tran, DePaul Vera, and Kelly Wallis. New Crop 2016 will be at the CCAI Courthouse Gallery from June 3 – September 29, 2016. CCAI extends its sincere appreciations to the artists, their schools, the Carson City Courthouse, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI commissioned Kris Vagner to write the following essay.*

The Avant-garde, The Traditional - What Do You Think?

In a fully networked world where art distribution is democratized and the cutting edge is all but impossible to define, is it time to bid good riddance to the avant-garde? A "Fresh Crop" of Reno/Tahoe artists inadvertently makes a case for it.

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For over a century, avant-gardism has been among the driving values in art. The avant-garde are those on the forefront. They push the boundaries, break the rules, protest institutions, or in some way forge new ground.

Since the late 1900s, it has been generally supposed that, in art, one must be on the cutting edge to be relevant. David Cottington, Professor of Modern Art History at Kingston College in London, put it this way



Mahsan Ghazianzad, *Carrying a Message of Poetry-Value*, acrylic on canvas, 68"x70", 2015

in his 2013 book, *The Avant-Garde: A Very Short Introduction*: "If [artworks] have been judged to be 'avant-garde', or to belong to 'the avant-garde', then they have been worthy of consideration. If not, then (with very few exceptions), they have not, and neither critics nor historians have paid them much attention. In short, modern art is and has been very largely whatever the avant-garde has made, or has said it is."

Fast forward to today. Communications technology has changed drastically. The internet, social media, and ever-smaller electronics have empowered us to produce and distribute art, music, and just about any other form of cultural expression easily and affordably. Anyone who owns a smartphone carries a pocket-sized video studio, publishing house, and broadcast station. In short, just about anyone can get just about anything that they've made, said, or written distributed to a global audience.

This increased power to produce and publish has affected how the art world works. It used to be that gallery directors and curators were the most likely entities to confer recognition and prestige upon artists and their work, and that this external validation was critical to artists' success. An artist's reputation — and one's "worth" in the market — would be affirmed by museum shows, advanced degrees, grants, awards, and attention from critics.

All of these still exist, and they can all still confer prestige. But now they're optional. It's become possible to circumvent the gallery and academic systems altogether, skip the process of being validated by gatekeepers



Tom Drakulich, #4, low fired ceramic, enamel paint, 26"x 16"x 9", 2015

or tastemakers, and still achieve financial success and gain acclaim. Now that we all have access to advanced distribution systems, any artist can skip any middleman. In one example, a 2014 Vogue magazine headline read, "Why the World's Most Talked-About New Art Dealer Is Instagram." The article explains how one artist uses the social media photo-sharing platform to send paintings straight from her New Orleans studio to collectors around the globe, including royalty, corporate executives, and "one of the wives of the Rolling Stones":

> Today artists use Instagram as their own virtual art gallery, playing both dealer and curator while their fans become critics and collectors, witnessing the creative process in real time.
>
> "I can post a painting and it will sell before the paint is dry," explained artist Ashley Longshore, whose glossy crystal-covered canvases are regularly bought straight off her Instagram feed for upwards of $30,000.

For better or for worse — and there are plenty of thoughtful cases to be made on both sides — the acts of making, showing, and selling art now occur in a system that is ever-less hierarchical and ever-more democratic. At the present moment, when it comes to establishing a career as a visual artist, crowd-sourced approval is as good as the approval of long-entrenched institutions. Case in point: The Washington Post reported that in 2012, the National Endowment for the Arts awarded about $117 million in grant funding for arts projects. That same year, Kickstarter, crowd-funded around $324 million.

As a result of this trend toward democratization, viewers' tastes have grown so pluralistic they could be called indefinable, and so is the range of work that's being made and noticed. Experts are hard-pressed to accurately characterize a predominant sound in current music, a predominant look in current fashion, a predominant thematic or conceptual tide in current visual arts.

Given that descriptions of dominant sounds and styles are presently so elusive; how could an artist or art movement possibly stay avant-garde? To the artists of Capital City Arts Initiative's *New Crop 2016*, and to



Kelly Wallis, *Security Blanket (detail)*, used security envelopes and glue, 72"x 60", 2016

a noticeable cross-section of contemporary artists internationally, pursuing the avant-garde is no longer necessarily a primary motivation.

The *New Crop 2016* exhibit showcases paintings, prints, and sculptures by five emerging artists who work in the Reno/Tahoe region. Each has either recently graduated with an MFA or is currently an MFA candidate at the University of Nevada, Reno or Sierra Nevada College. These artists did not consciously band together to mount an exhibit in order to bid good riddance to the avant-garde. Instead they were selected by CCAI curators on the bases of craftsmanship, creativity, and for making work that's both thought-provoking and accessible.

Nonetheless, this particular juxtaposition of emerging artists makes a strong case for ignoring the drive for novelty. Each one committed to an intensive two- or three-year program of art production and thorough

study, during which decisions about the nature of their relationships with the greater art world have been theirs to make. Each chose to retreat into a realm of personal growth and quiet reflection, and each has established a practice that pays deep respect to the artists and traditions that came before them.

Tom Drakulich creates torso-sized, ceramic sculptures. Their abstract shapes refer loosely to vessels, geological forms, and the chimney-like shapes made iconic by Peter Voulkos, grandfather of 20th-century Abstract Expressionist ceramics. Drakulich throws 35-pound lumps of clay into cylinders, cuts off pieces, and reassembles them into a collage-like sculpture, along the way processing his personal ideas about trauma — "the mundane variety," he says, the unfortunate occurrences that happen every day — and recovery.

Mahsan Ghazianzad loves poetry. One of her favorite lines is, "Painting is silent poetry, and poetry is painting with the gift of speech," by the ancient Greek poet Simonides. She uses acrylic paints the way a poet might use language, layering together carefully selected fragments of her personal history, weaving in emotional clues. Ghazianzad grew up in Iran, where citizens felt the weight of living under surveillance, and freedom of speech was not a given. Her palette reflects this weight; she incudes colors that would be cheery were they not muted by overlays of dark gray, signifying the virtual cloud that she always felt hanging over Tehran as a child and a teen. Ghazianzad rolls out unframed canvasses on the floor and speaks of the physicality of addressing a large surface on the ground as passionately as Jackson Pollock did. She adds words and phrases in Farsi here and there, lines the underscore the elemental themes that motivate her: beauty, truth, faith.



Quynh Tran, *Barriers*, ink on paper, 96"x 11", 2015

Kelly Wallis, who worked for over a decade as a graphic designer, cultivated a long-running fascination with the often-hidden designs on the insides of security envelopes. The patterns please her aesthetically; they also satisfy her interest in repetition, order, and routine — and the tradition of process-based artwork that mirrors those. (She cites the Japanese installation artist Yayoi Kusama as an inspiration.) Wallis uses the envelopes as a sculptural material. She crumples them to soften them into a fabric-like texture, then assembles them into quilt-like "security blankets," sized for babies or king-sized beds. To her, the sculptures, and even more so the process of making them, are personal and emotional, an outlet for dealing with issues of confidence, security and insecurity.

Quynh Tran grew up in Vietnam and studied printmaking in Texas. Much of her time in the United States has been marked by the frustration and isolation of a language barrier. When she's making monotypes and combining them with abstract drawings, she's using the process as a coping mechanism for culture shock. Tran adopts some of the conventions of installation art — filling the volume of a room, transforming a space — while remaining disciplined as a printmaker. Rather than filling a room with projections or other objects, she sticks strictly to prints, pushing the limits of their two-dimensionality. Long, scroll-shaped prints suspended from the ceiling in a Mobius-strip-like configuration undulate quietly in mid-air. She transforms rooms by wallpapering them floor-to-ceiling with repeated patterns of colorful prints. Tran also cites Yayoi Kusama, who obsessively filled rooms with dot stickers, as a game-changing influence who helped her put into perspectives one of her main motives: She says, "I make art to cope with all the things I can't control."

DePaul Vera first saw 1960s-style Pop Art in a sixth-grade art-history lesson. It was love at first sight. He says, "I immediately was drawn to Lichtenstein's use of dots and over-exaggerated compositions." He makes drawings that rely on a classically Warholian mix of widely appealing commercial art influences, bold graphics, and exuberant Pop portraiture. To Vera, it's important to form a strong connection with his subjects. He photographs each person, makes drawings from the photographs, and prints them digitally onto drawing paper. The colors in a given piece depend on the personality of the subject. Vera's work translates so well to on-screen viewing that he could model his career around Instagram sales alone — and he does sell on



DePaul Vera, *DePaul, Kelly, Mahsan, Quynh, Tom*, digital illustration prints, 22"x 28", 2016

Instagram — but he maintains a reverent traditional streak, voluntarily participating in the gallery system and exhibiting his work before rooms full of in-person viewers as often as possible. Much as his work relies on mechanical tools, he strongly values the human connections it can spawn.

The *New Crop 2016* artists, while they don't necessarily set out to critique or oppose the direction of the art world as a whole, do collectively, quietly assert that pushing their limits as individuals is as relevant a practice as pushing the edges of newness has been to avant-gardists.

The actor Tom Hiddleston put it beautifully: "Artists instinctively want to reflect humanity, their own and each other's, in all its intermittent virtue and vitality, frailty and fallibility."

Kris Vagner
Reno, Nevada
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