

ART



A dozen regional blacksmiths and metal artists, including Kansas Citians Justin Bell, Stretch, Steve Austin and Allan Winkler (whose work is at left), will show their works and wares in the first annual Metal Arts show at the Chiro Studio and Gallery, 706 West

SPOTLIGHT: METAL ARTS SHOW

Penway, from 6 to 9 tonight. The exhibit of lighting fixtures, furniture, sculpture and other works in metal continues through Dec. 24. Gallery hours are 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday-Thursday and by appointment, (816) 471-2781. — Alice Thorson/The Star

OUT OF GAS

Exhibit doesn't show faculty members' work at its best

By ALICE THORSON
The Kansas City Star

Tom Gregg's realistic painting of a generic red plastic gasoline container heads up the Kansas City Art Institute's 2002 faculty show at the school's H&R Block Artspace.

REVIEW Gregg, who teaches in the painting department, is known for his deadpan images of common objects, carefully chosen as vehicles for broader commentary — on desire, human vices and, in this case, current events.

Gregg has titled the work "Let's Roll," a phrase that has become a rallying cry of American determination in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy.

What does a container of gasoline have to do with it?

Many powerful people say, "Nothing." But Gregg asks us to think about the relationship between terrorism and oil.

Gregg's conceptual painting is a virtual anomaly in an exhibit characterized by an eerie sense of disengagement from the world outside the ivory tower.

By and large, the themes and artistic vocabulary in this showing of works by 26 faculty members are so remote from current events and art world trends that one is hard pressed to identify what decade they were made in.

One might deduce their place, however, from their insularity, a common stumbling block for Midwestern artists (and others who work far from the art hotbeds of New York and Los Angeles). Another regionalist tendency much in evidence here is attentiveness to craftsmanship over ideas.

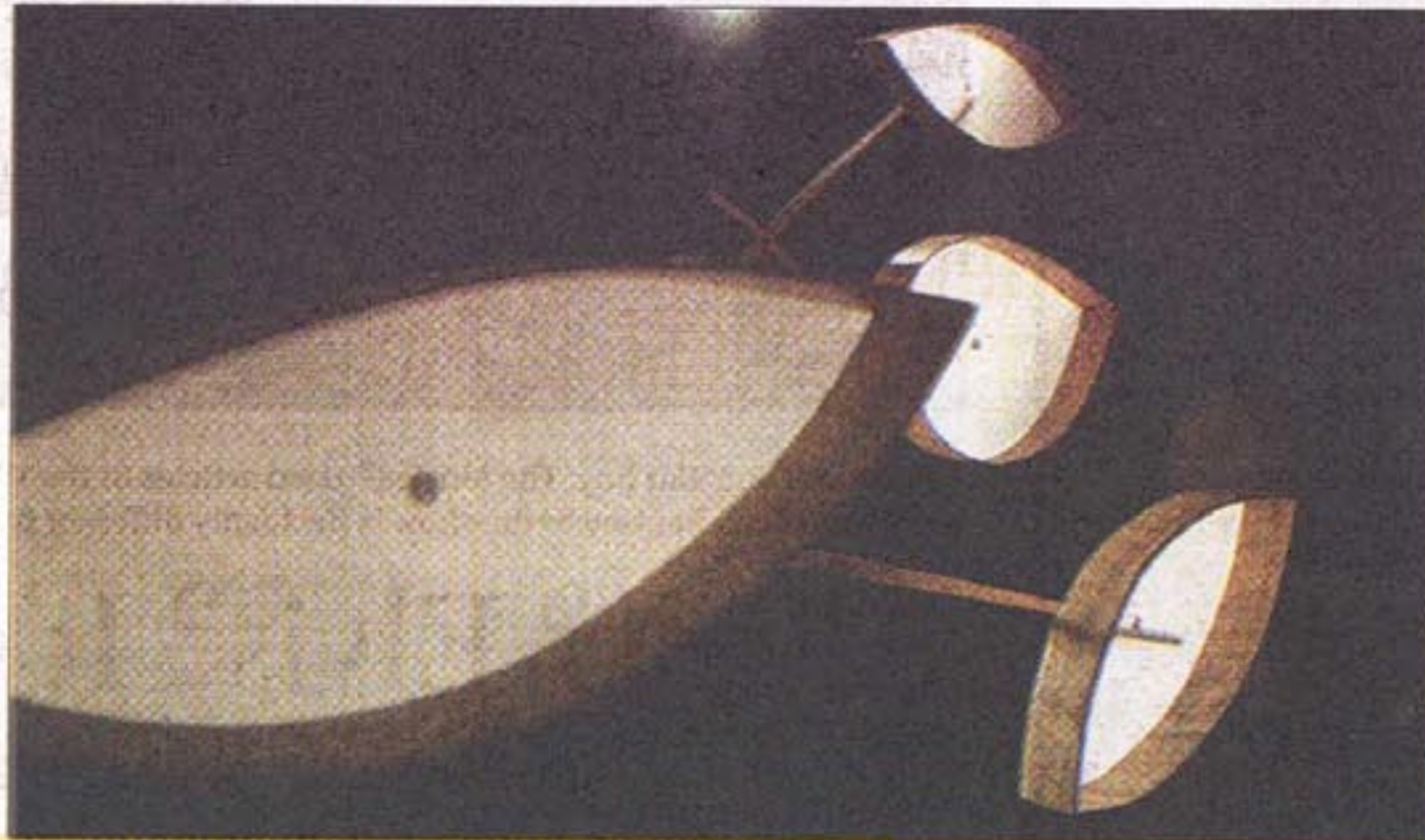
In all, it's not a heartening presentation of the Kansas City Art Institute aesthetic. Nature and nostalgia are pronounced themes here, surfacing in the artworks and in the melange of objects displayed with them.

Faculty members decided to expand the purview of their exhibit to include objects they collect — presumably to throw light on where they find creative inspiration — hence the exhibit's title "Gathering Influence: The Artist as Collector."

The first indication that this was maybe not such a great idea is the garage-sale-meets-gift-shop cast of the installation. The second is its effect on the art experience.

The distractions posed by collections of bugs, tools, seaweed and all manner of artworks and artifacts from other times and places can make communing with the faculty's artworks like trying to have a conversation while the television's on.

Sometimes the concept works as it's supposed to, as in Jim Sajovic's display of artworks by Francis Bacon, Joel Peter Witkin



A view from beneath Tim O'Neill's 'Cincopod' mobile



Detail of Pauline Verbeek-Cowart's textile 'Paper Chain'

and Eadweard Muybridge beside his own figurative paintings that distill the ideas and forms of artists he admires into a personal expression.

Sometimes the effect is bizarre. Judith Sanazaro's collection of designer garments spurs interesting insights into her ornately painted but visually spare gestural abstractions. But the placement of this glittery frippery beneath her large painting really throws the artwork for a loop.

The opportunity to exhibit works from their collections led some artists to make artworks out of them: James Whitworth incorporated his wife's collection of German glass folk ornaments into a clunky cast-aluminum Christmas tree. Others took it as justification to show old work that related to their collectibles.

Certainly Lester Goldman has made intriguing strides since the wacky, puppetry-based pieces from 1996 and 1997 shown here, accompanied by a small Leland Bell painting and a penis cover from the Lamu-

tul Tribe of Sepik River, New Guinea, from his collection.

Sculptor Marcie Miller Gross also has done better work than what she chose to exhibit here, as has painter Leah Joo.

Look elsewhere to see what both of these artists can do: Gross created a spectacular minimalist cube from blue towels for the Charlotte Street Fund exhibition now at Johnson County Community College; Joo really fleshes out her flair for mysterious narratives in her present one-person show at Dennis Morgan Gallery.

Pauline Verbeek-Cowart's rhythmic and dimensional textiles based on natural forms are a highlight of this gathering; visually and conceptually, James Reittinger's architectural model, "Zerohus," a series of minimalist modules with drawbridge entrances offering the xenophobe's ultimate in protection and privacy, is another memorable moment.

Shirley Luke Schnell has never looked better than her present grouping of alluringly



Tom Gregg's painting 'Let's Roll'

THE SHOWS

■ "Gathering Influence: The Artist as Collector" and "The Reading Room, One" continue through Dec. 18 at the H&R Block Artspace at the Kansas City Art Institute, 16 E. 43rd St. Hours are noon to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday and noon to 6 p.m. Saturday; (816) 561-5563.

dimensional oval panels painted with moody abstracted landscapes. Tim O'Neill's "Cincopod" mobile of buoyant organic forms sounds a note of playful, unpretentious grace.

These works shine amid a plethora of competent but much less engaging efforts. The fact is, there is enough talent on this faculty to produce an exhibit that is better than this. But to do so, editing and frankness would have to be part of the process.

Artists are not always the best judges of their own work, nor even how best to present it. An outside curator, unsusceptible to faculty pressure, might be the answer next time.

■ Upstairs, "The Reading Room, One," an exhibit of books, magazines, and exhibition catalogs, overflows with the new ideas and information that the downstairs show stints.

Artspace director, Raechell Smith, invited Kate Hackman, editor of *Review*, Steve Maturo, owner of Museo, artists James Brinsfield and Derek Porter, and KCAI faculty member Maria Elena Buszek, to share texts they consider important, inspiring or amusing, and added some selections of her own.

The result is a cornucopia of cultural information encompassing pop culture, art theory, new art and architecture, and cutting-edge design, attractively displayed on shoulder-height shelves on three walls.

The display of publications is part of a high-design scheme for the room, which includes a reader-friendly contemporary table and Eames chairs from the school's collection. They cluster beneath a "Frisbi" lighting fixture by leading designer Achille Cas-



'The Reading Room, One'