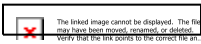


Exquisite forms; Graceful designs, quirky narratives and feminist sensibilities mark four Minneapolis gallery shows.(SCENE)



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Refinement is a rare thing in this era of jitterbug attention spans and high-gloss hucksterism, and yet it is in full bloom in four Minneapolis gallery shows this month. With themes ranging from feminist narrative and adolescent angst to meditations on nature, the shows encompass many styles and delicately executed forms. Running through the 100-plus works is a line of earthy honesty and unvarnished hopefulness that's especially noteworthy in this time of detachment and skepticism. If January's gray days have befogged your psyche, these shows offer an upbeat antidote.

Susan Hensel Design Occupying a nondescript storefront on Cedar Avenue, Susan Hensel Design has staked out socio-political territory in the 18 months since its opening. Hensel defines the space as "a gallery of narrative art," and has staged shows critiquing politics, exploring spirituality and featuring experimental book designs. Born and raised in upstate New York, she earned a BFA in painting and sculpture from the University of Michigan and worked for more than 20 years as a potter and ceramic sculptor before recasting herself as an impresario and book artist. Her national reputation now rests primarily on her handmade volumes of poetry and images. Called "Desire," Hensel's current show is an unabashedly feminist paean to the pleasures, pain and doubt of women of a certain age (she is 57) as they question their own allure and grapple with the changes maturity brings. The gallery's entrance chamber is lined with 23 red-and-black bordered collages that combine Hensel's drawings of women's heads and torsos with ovarian and floral imagery and reproductions of Eadweard Muybridge's famous photos of men in motion. A shrine-like installation in an alcove features a book-version of the same images on a pedestal surrounded by related images, enlarged and backlit. A scattering of cloyingly-scented silk rose petals pushes the installation perilously close to kitsch, but Hensel's adroit

drawing and graphic design skill effectively restore the display's balance and harmony. (Susan Hensel Design, 3441 Cedar Av. S., Mpls. Ends Feb. 24, free. 612-722-2324. Poetry reading, 7-9 p.m. Feb. 11, free.) Minnesota Center for Book Arts Located in downtown Minneapolis near the new Guthrie Theater, the Open Book building is home to two galleries featuring unusually complementary shows this month. The MCBA gallery has a vast, deliciously diverse display of sculpture and wall pieces made of handmade paper by 21 artists from around the country. Some of the sculptures allude to natural forms - leaves, seed pods, cocoons, seaweed. Others demonstrate paper's astonishing malleability, translucency and textural possibilities. Highlights include lacy, bowl-like sculptures by Jill Powers that look as if they were made of pressed seaweed, a "Black Torah" by Robbin Ami Silverberg, who incised script into a black-paper scroll, and three elegant, corset-like sculptures by Julie McLaughlin that inflect 19th-century feminine undergarments with a whisper of 21st-century bondage. McLaughlin would thrive as a designer of opera costumes. (MCBA gallery, Open Book, 1011 Washington Av. S., Mpls. Ends Feb. 25, free. 612-215-2520 or www.mnbookarts.org.)

Rosalux Gallery, also in the Open Book building, has sensitively paired the whimsical paintings of Jennifer Davis and Daniel Buettner. Rendered in pencil overlaid with muted blues, greens and damped-down '50s shades of peach and lemon, their quiet images weave little narratives into surrealistic panels. Davis affects a jeune fille look, collaging magazine imagery (heads, arms, skylines) into nostalgic vignettes. More of a storyteller, Buettner pairs his fragmentary images - of robots, a motorscooter, a pig-in-cowboy-boots - with excerpts from "Hindsight Is 20/40," his novel-in-progress about a typically awkward adolescent. Daft though they sound, the images and text set up a curiously successful interplay. (Rosalux. Ends Jan. 31, free. 612-747-3942 or www.rosaluxgallery.com.)

Gallery Co. St. Paul painter Theresa Handy pushes her minimalist landscapes in subtle new directions in her highly accomplished current show. Casting off the moodiness that often made her previous work oppressive, Handy has embraced sky, grasses, birds and even telephone lines as sly subjects in large, beautifully glazed canvases that remain, nevertheless, essentially abstract blocks of color. Texture, light and gesture are key in paintings like "Frozen Ground," a diptych that poses a panel of blazing white above a dirt-dark rectangle, or "Commute," in which telephone lines rim a long orange canvas that abuts a wide panel of blue sky. Elegantly understated. (Gallery Co., 400 1st Av. N., Mpls. Ends Jan. 28, free. 612-332-5252 or www.galleryco.net.)

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