

ENTERTAINMENT

Art review

Posted Thursday, Sep. 23, 2010

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"M-I-C. See ya real soon. K-E-Y. Why? Because..."

If you know the rest of the lyrics to the Mickey Mouse Club theme song, then the images, including dozens of Mickey "mice" that appear in Vernon Fisher's art, will be intimately familiar. He juxtaposes the polar extremes from the Cold War Disney characters with nuclear explosions, for example in huge installations and paintings that are hung in multipanel presentations. The retrospective, "Vernon Fisher: K-Mart Conceptualism," opens Saturday at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth and covers work from 1977 to 2009.



In 1981, Fisher hit the national trifecta when his work was exhibited at the Guggenheim, Whitney and Hirshhorn museums. Even though this was an invitation to join the rarefied circles of the East Coast art establishment, Fisher chose to stay in Texas, teach at the University of North Texas and paint from afar. His biography begins, "Born in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1943. Lives and works in Fort Worth, Texas." The Modern has a long history with Fisher, mounting a show that contained his work at least once a decade since 1970. Now, the museum is giving over its second floor to 37 monumental works -- all strikingly powerful. Even though some of them are more than 30 years old, it all looks fresh. The survey fits, feels right and looks perfect in scale, placement and time.

It's the best-looking show that the Modern has mounted since opening the new building in 2002. The deft handling comes from familiarity. Michael Auping, chief curator at the Modern, and Fisher have a long association and friendship that began long ago. Auping discovered Fisher's work when he was a curator in San Francisco. Since coming to the Modern, he has added seven Fisher works to the permanent collection.

The decision to mount a retrospective of a local artist's work "was a struggle," he says. "It seems so easy, but I wanted a show that would surprise people who think they know Vernon's work." For his part, Fisher has readjusted and upscaled a number of pieces to fit the Modern. The canvas cutout birds that are stapled to the wall in 84 Sparrows were enlarged from budgie- to pigeon-size. The massive installation Boat, Island, Ape, an homage to King Kong and the fence that separated the natives from the massive ape, was also upsized to Big Gulp proportions. The piece emits cartoon sound effects the sproing of big leaps, the tweeting of a knockout punch, an old-fashioned telephone ring and the universal irritant It's a Small World for a soundtrack that permeates the galleries and the subconscious.

This combination of mainstream references, visual and audio, is what gives the show its "K-Mart" appellation, but Fisher does not consider it to be a pejorative descriptor. For him "K-Mart" means "ordinary" -- a culture class that includes some of his favorite images from childhood: the Three Stooges, Tarzan, Airstream trailers and Nancy cartoon characters. Some of them appear with regularity. Fisher doesn't turn them into heroic icons, as the pop artists did. He uses them like little semaphore flags, scattered across his canvases in the manner of thought balloons. They carry messages but on frequencies that have to be self-generated.

The appropriated images, recurring ellipses, globes and grids make it difficult to date Fisher's pieces. They could be from any of the past four decades, and they make subtle connections to other pieces in the Modern's collection. The Coriolis Effect, with its spinning fluorescent tubes, is akin to the light works by minimalist sculptors Dan Flavin and Donald Judd. The pieces assembled with cutouts, tree branches and taxidermic animals are reminiscent of things used by Robert Rauschenberg; the painted seascapes to those of Gerhard Richter. There is great variety in Fisher's work, and yet the whole is held together by his painting skills.

Fisher is a spectacular painter. The canvases that look like photographs of old black and white television screens with a horizontal hold problem? They're painted. His over erased chalk drawings on blackboards? They are all painted. The mono chromatic image of Cheetah? Surely it's a stencil, but it, too, is painted. Every grid, every letter, all the Mickeys and Robert Mitchums, they're all painted. Fisher combines these familiar figures with perilous situations. Some panels include narratives that Fisher has written. He obtained a degree in literature before he moved on to art, and he uses his writing skill to move from abstract art to conceptual pieces, adding his narrative texts to his work in what Auping describes as a "Texas storytelling kind of thing." But the stories are inert and inconclusive, which is no easy trick, as any text takes on enormous pretensions when applied to canvas.



"If you have enough threads out there, people want to weave them into a narrative," Fisher says. Fisher assembles his panels in pairs or in triplicate and mounts them like algebraic equations to be read left to right, first one thing, then the next. Sometimes they are set off by three-dimensional commas or parentheses that are stuck to the gallery wall. The sum of the panels might add up to a narrative, or maybe they reduce to a single punch line.

Visually, Fisher's work is like poking the knobs on a radio dial, a bit of story or news, a few bars of a song, and static, which can coalesce into a perfect soundtrack for the moment. That's the conceptual part, but there is no definitive explanation for what it all means, the blackboard paintings notwithstanding. During his career, Fisher has made a number of works that resemble blackboards with white chalk drawings. They are some of his most famous works, and they set up the viewer for receptive instruction, but it's not forthcoming. "The blackboard just lends itself so well to my interests in the tentative and fluid quality of the mind at work. A blackboard is always in transition. Someone else's stuff is there, it's fleeting information," Fisher says.

There are six blackboard paintings in the show, and they play brain games. Between marveling at the trompe l'oeil effect of layered chalk erasures and what appear to be chalk drawings, the mind tries to open receptors for incoming information, blackboards being a traditional teaching device, but nothing is delivered. Fisher does not spoon-feed meaning. The paintings and installations mean whatever the viewer interprets them to mean. The Modern is capitalizing on the possibilities that can be read into Fisher's work, and is encouraging museum guests to record their interpretations on a special micro site that should be operational by mid-October.