

Puzzling Pieces



This weekend saw the opening of a very puzzling art exhibit at the Machines with Magnets studio in Pawtucket. Part bar, part performance space, part gallery and part recording studio, Machines with Magnets could be called a puzzling environment on its own. In the gallery section of the space, you can now view recent work by Umberto Crenca. Crenca, the founder of Providence-based arts organization AS220, is known in the community as a champion of the arts and an advocate for unjuried art exhibitions. In his own work, he's known for his use of art as social commentary. This show displays a recent part of his puzzle piece series, a decades-long endeavor that encompasses about 135 pieces created by Crenca. Not literally puzzle pieces - although those make some appearances - this series is really an exploration, in two dimensions, of social and political topics that intrigue, frustrate, or simply puzzle the artist.

"Some of them are saying something pretty clear," says Crenca, "and if others seem ambiguous, well, they might be. Some of them certainly approach issues I'm a little confused about, and that probably comes across - I hope it does."

The show is titled "Puzzled: Ode (Owed) to Channing?" and includes a large blow-up of Crenca's first review, decades ago, by Providence Journal critic Channing Gray. Crenca credits the sometimes scathing review with inciting the creation of AS220 and a deeper dedication by Crenca to his own work. (see a TED talk on the subject here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=tD-T4LIddtE)

Compositionally, some of the work is striking, some deliberately off-balance or disturbing. All of it is visually and mentally intense - the sort of work you want to get up close to, to examine the details and numerous levels of meta-reference.

"That's Gaddafi's severed head. The Black liquid is oil, the red is blood. I think that one's pretty straightforward," says Crenca, contrasting two of the pieces. "This one, though, takes a lot of explaining. I'm sure there are things in here that only mean something to me," he says, rattling off a list of authors whose thoughts are represented in various abstract ways. Oh, and the numbers of the Fibonacci sequence are carefully scattered about that canvas as well.

Some pieces feature tiny thought bubbles, on others you'll find referential figures tucked in the corners. One piece includes a lot of glitter. Figuring out each theme can feel like assembling a puzzle in your mind.

While the puzzle analogy has numerous applications to this collection of work - from pun to metaphor - it also seems like the artist may be hoping that someday, the collection as a whole will fit together like the pieces of a puzzle, granting insight into the conceptual and emotional makeup of the artist, complete with contradiction, confusion and clarity.

A series of pieces and one very large work are on display from now until April 27th at Machines with Magnets, 400 Main St. Pawtucket, RI - www.machineswithmagnets.com