

Playing with Perspective

ART DIALOGUE

Peter and Lucia Simek discuss Jelf Zilm's cinematic creations in *7023629730* at Marty Walker Gallery and the group show *Femme Fatale* at Holly Johnson Gallery, featuring the work of five female artists: Virginia Fleck, Sharon Louden, Kim Cadmus Owens, Kim Squaglia, and Sarah Walker.

By Lucia and Peter Simek



Untitled (Nosferatu) by Jeff Zilm

Jeff Zilm's show called *7023629730*, which opened at [Marty Walker Gallery](#) on June 13, includes large white canvases airbrushed with an ashy, grey-toned hues. The paints used in the work were made from old film stock — prints of classic films were broken down through a process of emulsion to create a kind of dye. The material was then loaded into an airbrush gun and sprayed onto canvases primed with the same paint used for movie screens, an extreme white that mixes in miniscule fragments of glass to intensify the paint's reflectivity.

Peter Simek: It is probably an unfair criticism, but I am always a little put off by art that you need to know a lot of outside information about in order to understand what the artist is trying to say. I'm thinking here of someone like Anselm Kiefer whose work on its own terms is fascinating and plumb-able, but when you read Kiefer's statements he implies that he is working towards very specific philosophical ideas. Once I know this information I feel like it cheats the work out of its own play of revealing. From what I can gather, Jeff Zilm isn't trying to make the audience think of anything in particular, but you do need to know that these works are made from the acrylic emulsion of celluloid prints of the films that are referenced in the titles. Since I knew this coming into the gallery, I couldn't help but bring a lot of deliberate ideas to the work. Most shows you walk in without knowing anything and you are forced to approach the work on its own terms. With these I immediately started to look for the fingerprints of the cinematographer somewhere on the canvas.

Lucia Simek: Sure, knowing how or why something is made can deter you from really being able to look at it purely. Keifer is a good example. But Keifer's work is nearly always looked at in a museum with a note on the wall briefing you on his concepts, choice of medium etc. Galleries don't do that — the art is just hung with its title and the rest is up to the viewer. Already, that's a pretty pure experience of a work of art.

In regards to knowing that Jeff Zilm makes his paintings from emulsion from celluloid prints, I tend to think that whether or not you know how something was made, there is always a visceral reaction to it. We don't question the meaning of paint when it's used to make a painting, but we want to question the reason for Zilm using old film emulsion because we fancy that there is some poetic significance behind it. Maybe there is, maybe there isn't. What seems certain, though, is that reading the titles of these paintings points you in a certain thoughtful direction: A painting with a dark and folded ashy splotch atop a muted grey background called *Untitled (Nosferatu)* makes you begin to feel a kind of foreboding, creeping darkness. But Zilm, seems to call it (*Nosferatu*) only as an indicator of the source of the material. But that doesn't change the reaction of wanting to the work to reference it's original source: the celluloid film strip. Because of that, I find myself looking for narrative in these paintings, or if not narrative, than a feeling that's analogous to the movies he's using to make these works. Still, these things have their own kind of power regardless of knowing a lick about them. The smokiness of them defines a mood of mystery and quiet no matter what their called or made from.



Untitled (The Bellboy) by Jeff Zilm

P.S. It's that tendency to look for narrative that I'm talking about, and I'm not saying it is necessarily a bad thing here. In fact, I think it has an interesting effect. We knew about the process entering the gallery, another viewer may not have known. Zilm must have known, then, there would be these two viewers, and in a sense, these two viewers then are looking at different works. There is a phenomenological statement here, intended or not, about modes of perception – about a single object taking on two separate identities as a result of a particular viewer. I think it is impossible to say that Zilm wanted something about the original films he used to come across in the work itself. He used *Nosferatu*, but I think any German expressionist film – or any film from the 1930s for that matter – when completely emulsified would create a similar tone. The role of the specific films mentioned in the titles, then, become a play on perception, a play on the idea of a viewer writing him or herself into a work by scripting narratives in a narrative-less plane. Zilm's work, in its mysterious, enticing ambiguity, seems perfectly suited as the accomplice in this play between perceiver and perceived. You get lost in the little ridges of texture, the white paint behind the grey spills out like light, and the canvases almost seem to be projecting light out of their two-dimensional spaces. Appropriately, there is a lot of projection going on here.

LS: Exactly. The gallery becomes a kind of theater.

The group show *Femme Fatale*, which opened June 12 at the [Holly Johnson Gallery](#), gathers the work of five female artists: Virginia Fleck, Sharon Loudon, Kim Cadmus Owens, Kim Squaglia, and Sarah Walker.

Peter Simek: At Holly Johnson's show *Femme Fatale*, I moved through the gallery rather quickly, was amused by the great balloon in the back room, grabbed a cup of wine, and examined the exquisite craftsmanship of Kim Squaglia's glassy resin works; but it wasn't until I made my way back to the front of the gallery that I really got caught up in a work. The piece was Virginia Fleck's *Makeover Mandala* in the front window.

Like Fleck's other pieces in the show this circular work was pieced together with scraps of bags; but unlike some of her other stuff, there were other plastic cut outs arranged in a pinwheel-like pattern around the work. The cut-out images were My Little Ponies, Cat Woman, and other girlish child characters. The collection and repetition of these characters had an interesting effect. It was like a sudden bombardment with a heap of girlish femininity, the objects all being the kinds of images in popular culture that define the feminine to young girls. It was whimsical and funny. But I also couldn't help but notice how overtly sexual all of these childhood characters were – even the My Little Ponies with their big, batting eyes and flowing California hair. The piece, I think, was getting at that delicate balance in female sexuality – the way it can empower and objectify; the innate danger in sexuality (potential consequences

of unleashed sexuality – pregnancy, disease) and something that is silly and laughable about being sexy.



The Dream That Dreamed Me with Hub Mandala
by Virginia Fleck

Lucia Simek: Right — what was so good about these mandalas of Fleck's was the great way they conveyed a sense of playfulness, but also an undercurrent of the odd power of commodity, and the tangled relationship between objectivity of women and the real thing. The mandala is a really interesting tool to get these ideas across: it's a design traditionally used to consider or meditate on particular spiritual questions, none of which I know in any depth, unfortunately. But, know them or not, the hypnotic, kaleidoscopic patterns Fleck makes in these pieces by using throw-away bags and retro girl icons, creates a kind of highly designed study in girliness and all the clichés and traps that females can get caught up in by their own

will or by the force of others. By using these images Fleck really seems to be making a comment on what girls and the women that raise them let influence their own sense of center, to play with the image of the mandala here. She's pointing to a skewed vision.

Virginia Fleck's large inflated pillow (that you think looked like a balloon) called *The Dream Dreamed Me* in the main gallery is just delightful to look at. It's buoyant, with thread tassels hanging from the sides. It's a hyperbolic riff on female material dreams and fantasies, made from scads of shopping bags and filled with hot air. It's a lovely and hilarious image to think of trying to rest your head on this thing, and a strong metaphor for women's propensity (and I'm generalizing here) to lay their head on stuff that's ultimately empty.

PS: I also liked how it moved as people in the gallery moved around it. But I don't want to forget Kim Squaglia's works here. Each piece was built up on a wood base with resin, and to each resin layer, Squaglia adds lines of paint. This process is repeated an almost masochistic number of times until the canvas is a few inches thick, and some of the painted lines recede deep into the resin layers, while others remain close to the surface. There is a sense of formal unity to the work as a whole, all the more impressive since each element of this form is added independent of corresponding lines and squiggles. But I particularly loved the dialogue between the layers — the way when you got up close to the work you could see lines that at first seemed to overlap didn't really touch at all, separated by resin layers, some only millimeters apart. I found this tense delicate play very moving. It was like the painted lines were longing for each other.

LS: Come hither, sweet line....

PS: Similar to Squaglia's stuff, Sharon Louden's small white canvas *The Lingering* portrayed a similar delicate beauty. The little squiggles of paint on the plain white canvass were so Japanese, so simple and lovely.

LS: This one was my favorite in the show, especially in light of the show title *Femme Fatale*, which connotes a kind manipulative ferocity in women, or a strength that's highly sexed. But this piece by Louden was utterly quiet, and meticulously crafted — the white paint on the wood was flawlessly applied so not a brushstroke was evident. It spoke about a kind of femininity that's not often lauded in contemporary art, dare I say as much. The sort of feminine *The Lingering* suggested was one of restraint and grace, with its only marks being loose and liquidly orange strokes in the upper left corner on this sea of perfect white. The whole thing leaves you longing for something, leaves you wondering. To my mind, those qualities are what can make women so powerful: a sense of mystery.

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