

Portraits of Isolation

Serial Thinking, through November 17 at Augustana College Art Gallery

Criticism comes easier than craftsmanship," said the ancient Greek painter Zeuxis, in his most famous quotation. With that admonition, this review is duly cautioned.

Zeuxis is also a national group of professional painters who support the art of the still life. The name is an interesting choice: The artist lost the still-life contest in which one of his most famous paintings was entered. Legend has it that Zeuxis painted a still life of grapes so perfect that birds tried to pick up the fruit. He was competing against Parrhasius, who showed him a painting covered by a veil. But when Zeuxis tried to raise the veil, it was revealed that the veil was part of the painting, and he had to admit defeat.

History lesson aside, Zeuxis' traveling show *Serial Thinking* – at the Augustana College art gallery through November 17 – is an excellent exhibit for a college that teaches painting. Students can see how several accomplished professional artists interpret the still life – the stuff and substance of many beginning painting classes. Just as hearing an experienced musician play a recorder can instruct a music student on the possibilities of that beginner's instrument, this show illustrates how far an artist can take the still life.

It is clear that these artists are interested in the craft of their art. They seem to want to spend their time in comfortable studios painting, rather than seeking experiences with which to enhance their artistic message.

Tim Kennedy's *Dichotomous Still Life with Mirror* shows a collection of objects on a table, and the artist appears to be depicting the random clutter of his studio. He paints them very well, and an artist can learn much from observing how he uses paint to create illusion.

Similarly, the title of Lynn Kotula's *Tea Box, Mango, Shell, & Funnel* describes what she has painted, and the work itself is professional but lacks passion or emotion. It's instructive to compare the two artists' styles: Kennedy uses sharp lines and clear contours to define objects, while Kotula uses fuzzy textures and surfaces to create her illusions. And *Serial Thinking* offers more than 20 different painting styles for the painter or painting lover to compare and contrast. One can pick up all kinds of tips on how to create illusions on canvas with line, texture, and color, as well as ideas for composition and graphic design.

But the trouble with using subject matter from the artist's own studio is that an isolation can occur, limiting the base of experiences with which an artist seasons his or her work. As Lance Esplund writes in the introductory catalog piece "Still Life Now": "In still life, allegory and metaphor are embedded not, necessarily, in stories of religion and myth, but in the objects, tools, and sustenance of our daily lives. The painter's lunch may serve as the morning's motif, and his supper as the afternoon's; or those items already most familiar: The palettes, bottles, and brushes of the studio may become objects for meditation on the traditions, subjects, and process of painting itself."

It is true that everyday objects can become the stuff of inspiration, but the paintings need to be infused with life experiences to reach the next level. A good example from this show is a painting barely the size of a three-by-five index card, *Floral Dream No. 38* by Ben Frank Moss. The small size allows the illusion of a vase and flowers to be created by broad and bold strokes. The freedom and positive strokes attract me to this work; there is no tentative feeling or reworking of errors. It is simply and completely an emotional response to the subject.



Dichotomous Still Life with Mirror by Tim Kennedy

I've always felt that art reflects a society more clearly than other media, and this show seems to demonstrate the functional specialization of our culture. The artists are so absorbed in their daily routines and profession that they think ordinary people will be inspired by looking at the objects in their studios. Many of these paintings suggest that these artists only interact socially with other artists, and I see the increasing isolation of our society reflected in works done by artists for artists; self-absorption separates people into separate activity spheres. How frequently do you interact with people outside your job or profession?

There's also a parallel to recent events in this country. Artists who socialize together and infuse each other's paintings with the values the group holds collectively, untempered by the influence of infidels, can be likened – in an immeasurably darker sense – to the way terrorists lived for years next door to other Americans, with their values reinforced by the members of their terrorist cells and without social interaction outside their group. We didn't know they existed because we rarely ventured outside our normal social spheres. In this very basic, fundamental way, *Serial Thinking* is a fascinating reflection of our society today. ■