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Durham is a fascinating city. It is certainly no different from other cities its size, but Durham is ours, and the differences between the front pages and the once-a-week art pages are as close as relatives who visit regularly. All this week the front page of this newspaper has been filled with stories about a young Durham teenager who is being held as a prime suspect in two murders.

Today on The Arts page, you can read about a show at a commercial gallery which features work that appeals to an art audience that wants ideas and themes as much as something that matches the furniture. Branch Gallery is devoted to art that pushes the viewer; the other side of that is the art is not easy to sell. It is difficult to reconcile that in one city there are people who believe art is one of the most important things in life and others whose only thoughts are focused on their safety because of crime.

Branch Gallery, which has opened its doors in a remodeled industrial building in downtown Durham, offers art on a regular basis that is not the usual fare of the local commercial gallery. This month is a case in point. In the main gallery are two- and three-dimensional objects by Taiyo Kimura (b. 1970), who uses milk cartons, soccer balls and large strips of zippers as his basic materials. In the smaller gallery is the work of Joshua Abelow (b. 1976), who builds his art on the techniques of commercial advertising.

Laughing at absurdity

This is Kimura's first solo exhibit in the United States, although he has shown in prestigious galleries in England and Canada. The entry gallery is sparsely furnished with three sculptural objects and a wall of 99 untitled drawings by Kimura, whose themes deal with the absurdities of life. An example is "Untitled (milk box-Meiji Oishi-Gyunyu)," a series of blue and white milk cartons, covered in Japanese writing. From a distance their repetitiveness and contrast of colors is visually beguiling. As we move closer and look down at the first open carton, we see it is empty.

A glance at the next one reveals one tiny doll inside. Now, intrigued, we look into each box and the small figures multiply, until 15 or more are squeezed into the bottom. Further on, the figures begin to disappear until the last one is as empty as the first. My immediate response to the figures packed into such a small space with such high walls was a prison of the mind. All of us are locked into a certain way of life, whether we are art collectors or people who sit, out of fear, behind bolted doors.

In other objects Kimura has fashioned two delightful crawling babies made of soccer balls. In the middle of the gallery are two mannequins, wrapped together as if in a shroud, except the material is made of strips of zippers and is coming unraveled as we look. This is the same artist, seen last year at the gallery, who used cutouts of eyes to decorate drawings that were both weird and beautiful.

The gallery notes tell us that Kimura's themes play with the "disconnected and confused nature of modern human relationships" and that the thoughtful visitor ponders why we live the way we do. Life is absurd, says the artist, and the only way we as human beings can survive is to laugh at it.

Subverting ad methods

Abelow is also an emerging artist, who is currently an MFA candidate from the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Mich. Abelow makes signs with simple words or phrases that put forth ambiguous meanings. For instance, he covers oil-on-linen paintings with the words "Harder Faster" or "Hang Me, Hang Me, Hang Me, Hang Me," and places them in a geometric grid, flattens them with bright colors and lettering and invites the viewer to determine the basic meaning. With one command he pushes himself to make more work and with the other, orders the viewer to buy.

Here, Abelow makes fun of the commercial art world even while he is seriously trying to make a place for himself in it. Or is there some other more personal meaning that the artist is conveying?

Like Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger and Bruce Nauman before him, Abelow follows a strong tradition of appropriating the methods of advertising and infiltrating them with messages that are political or personal. His large assemblages are stunning to look at, but close examination finds that throughout his messages he registers a cynical view of a world he is very much a part of.

Both artists give us work that is beautifully crafted, but created to make us uncomfortable as we sort out their meanings. The art is sophisticated and elite and plays to a Durham audience, the same audience that reads about murder in a nearby neighborhood. The tiny world of our city seems to have gone mad, and the artistic themes of the absurdity of life are closer and more real than we at first realized.

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