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AT TUFTS, REWARDS IN IMPROBABLE EXPERIMENTS

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MEDFORD Scientists "discover" and artists "create," but truly, is there a difference? Like a scientist, the artist comes up with a question: What will happen if I bring two unlikely scenarios together? What will happen if I change the viscosity of my paint? Applying those questions in an experiment, the artist discovers the answer.

The Tufts Second Annual Juried Summer Exhibition at Tufts University Art Gallery, a group show open to artists who live or work in Somerville and Medford, is a strong effort whose variety underscores the experimental nature of art. There are a few missteps, but each piece is like a different kind of net dipping into the great river of imagery, process, and serendipity; each brings in a different catch.

Jurors Amy Ingrid Schlegel, who directs the galleries at Tufts, and Pascal Spengemann, of Taxter and Spengemann Gallery in New York, have tapped 25 artists for the exhibition, which follows last year's splash! y first edition of this show. Somerville and Medford have a wealth of talent, but it's hard to imagine how many more years Schlegel will be able to pull a meaty exhibition from essentially the same pool of applicants. For now, though, the show is a treat, with plenty of room for work by each artist and a handsome installation that enhances the art.

The exhibition opens with lovely realist paintings by Matt Brackett, who laces his narratives with surrealist edge. His formula: apply images from the world of home improvement to human relationships, set in his grandmother's childhood house. The dreamlike, provocative results include "From Memory," in which a younger woman takes a tape measure to an older woman, who obligingly lies on the floor to be sized up, and "Breathing Spell," in which two men take a break indoors in lawn chairs, bathed in the hazy sunlight from a large window.

Like Brackett, photographer Katherine McVety starts with something cozy and famili! ar sense of place and then disrupts it. In her clever, enigmatic wor ks, she points out what creatures of orientation we are. "Central and East Africa, Kansas City, Kansas" shows signs pointing to Kenya, Uganda, and Zaire beside patio furniture.

Vincent McLoughlin uses acrylic paints of varying viscosity and experiments with the way they interact on wood. Sticking to primary colors, he applies the paint with airbrush techniques. The result is eye-catching: a series of organic forms layered in bright tones. Set in triptychs, these pieces become totemic, with one

section building on the next in a drumbeat of color and form.

Another abstract painter, Catherine Bowen, examines the idea of symmetry, but with none of the crispness we associate with it. She layers her paintings with pale shadows, then builds dots of color over them. They appear so organic, it's hard to believe they're symmetrical. Then again, don't tell that to a starfish; symmetry is rife throughout nature, and Bowen effectively conveys how life can be at once chaotic! and perfectly aligned.

In her small gouache drawings, Stacey Alickman puts the process of drawing under a microscope. She says she's interested in where the impulse of a gesture takes her, with no plan or intention. She pushes the pigment around to see what images arise, improvising her way into obscure narratives that are delicate but funny, sometimes angry or desperate, sometimes sweet.

Anna Shapiro examines how we symbolize place, juxtaposing different styles of landscape. "Camo/Map (Himalaya)" is a diptych with a gray camouflage pattern on one side, segueing into a Japanese-scroll-type painting that echoes it. Jan Corash comically plumbs our tendency to invest symbols with perhaps more meaning than they deserve, sending up Dan Brown's bestseller in her series of charts titled "Decoding DaVinci." She draws all the hands depicted in "The Last Supper" as if they were on an American Sign Language chart, suggesting another level of hidden meaning to that painting.

The Tufts Annual is rich with goodies like these. The main disappointment is the centerpiece: Kathleen Driscoll's "Water, Words and Polka Dots," a perplexing curtain of fabrics and plastics. It's supposed to make you reflect on our interaction with natural and built environments, and maybe comes close to evoking a waterfall of trash, but not close enough to make a good point. Last year, Hwae Jung occupied the same space with a powerful, ethereal piece, a landscape drawn with paper through the air. Driscoll's pedestrian work just can't compete.

Caption:
PHOTO

Memo:

WEEKEND / ARTS & PERFORMANCE / ART REVIEW

TUFTS SECOND ANNUAL JURIED SUMMER EXHIBITION AT: TUFTS UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY, AIDKMAN ARTS CENTER, MEDFORD, THROUGH JULY 31. 617-627-3518, WWW.TUFTS.EDU/AS/GALLERY

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