



Nerman's 'American Soil' paints bold statements against reckless waste

— By ALICE THORSON

“American Soil,” the inaugural special exhibition at the new Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, is a morality tale told in paint.

Large canvases and wall installations by six up-and-coming national talents evoke a society that has crumbled under the “more, bigger, better” ethos of American consumerism and its delusion of limitless resources.

“Look,” these artists seem to say. “Look at the sad, ugly mess we’ve created in our unbridled pursuit of wealth and possessions. Look at the communities, animals and nature we’ve destroyed in the name of progress.”

“It’s all about exploitation,” said the Nerman’s director, Bruce Hartman. “Now everything is all skewed. There’s no balance left.”

In selecting artworks, Hartman indulged his taste for vigorous emotional paint handling and dramatic use of color.

He sought varied cultural and geographic perspectives, choosing artists from New York and L.A., but also two women — Lisa Sanditz and Angelina Gualdoni — whose roots are in St. Louis.

The exhibit’s sobering account of where we are today incorporates the voices of American Indian artist Brad Kahlhamer and Hispanic artist Nicola Lopez.

Landscape and architecture are dominant motifs. Both come into play in Sanditz’s wry reflections on the explosion of casino development.

Her new works build on themes she explored in her fall 2006 exhibit at the Kemper Museum but are boosted by paint-handling that has become more animated, varied and energized.

And like other artists in this show, Sanditz works the paint as a carrier of meaning. Eddies of dark, oily viscous color cascade down the canvas beneath her miniaturized depiction of the Casino Queen riverboat in St. Louis.

A patch of Jackson Pollock-like drips represents the implosion of the old Boardwalk Casino in Las Vegas, invoking the Wyoming-born abstract expressionist’s attachment to the landscape and cultures of the West.

Her distant view of the American Indian-owned Santa Ana Star casino — with full parking lot — shows it ensconced in a magical Southwestern landscape beneath an inky sweep of starry sky.

In all of Sanditz's paintings, the majesty of the Western landscape celebrated by the 19th-century Hudson River School painters reaches its denouement in kitschy, environmentally destructive tourist attractions.

Sanditz shares one of the museum's three large special exhibition galleries with Kahlhamer, whose ties to his American Indian roots were all but severed at infancy, when he was adopted by Caucasian parents.

Rage, reproach and resigned humor electrify his two large watercolor and ink paintings, featuring legions of skulls and cartoony totem poles incorporating death's heads along with images of birds and animals.

Film titles and vignettes from Hollywood Westerns, the stenciled word "Pow Wow" and a list of menu items concocted from the sacred white buffalo reflect on a culture that has been marginalized and commercialized for more than a century.

A long wall installation comprising photographs, drawings, clippings and souvenirs from a road trip west drives the point home with contemporary immediacy.

Frank Magnotta's carefully worked graphite drawings occupy the opposite end of the aesthetic spectrum from Kahlhamer's layered expressionist outpourings. There is an eerie anonymity to his deadpan depiction of the United Nations building, which effectively reduces the powerful organization to a featureless modernist box, emptied of promise and power.

"Resort," another gridded box of a structure, this one slowly filling with water, attests to the collapse of modernism's utopian dreams under the pressure of commercial greed.

Nicola Lopez picks up the theme of dashed dreams in her vertiginous depictions of architectural chaos. Everything is broken, dysfunctional and off-kilter in her large canvases depicting ominously tilting skyscrapers and collapsing industrial structures, viewed in some cases as if from a hole in the ground.

Poisonous chemical clouds and menacing coiled forms like toy Slinkys billow and snake through several of these scenes, adding to the impression that we are at the end of something. A large wall relief made from printed Mylar wrapped around steel armatures suggests a tattered derrick flailing in death throes, about to come apart.

In contrast to the energy and drama of Lopez's compositions, a subdued sense of loss permeates Angelina Gualdoni's sadly scenic views of architectural decay, executed in oil and acrylic handled with the light touch and transparency of watercolor.

Nature steps in to reclaim an abandoned department store in "Memory Glides Forward." A beautiful '50s-style office building succumbs to rubbish and neglect in "Slating in Suspension."

Although the paintings confine themselves to depictions of quiet entropy, these structures seem haunted by the forces responsible for their demise: white flight, closed plants or competition from the latest mall or development.

Memories of Katrina and the prospect of future natural disasters hover about Tomory Dodge's flooded and junk-strewn vistas, which he describes with large, colorful daubs like an Impressionist with a house painter's brush.

A forlorn trailer bobs on the water in "Salton Sargasso." An avalanche of debris descends from a tunnel-like arch in "Delta."

The paint acts in these canvases, shattering objects as violently as any hurricane.

Images of people are all but absent from the 27 works in this show. Instead, despoiled landscapes and disintegrating objects and structures serve as surrogates for a mentality these artists see as no longer viable — and, increasingly, they're not alone.

ON EXHIBIT

The show: "American Soil"

When: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday; 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Friday; noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. Closed Mondays. Through Jan. 27.

Where: Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Johnson County Community College, 12345 College Blvd., Overland Park

How much: Free

For more information: 913-469-2344