

Quirk Works

A new Broad Street gallery shows off art by up and comers. **by Paulette Roberts-Pullen**

ART



In an effort to blur some of the usual distinctions between craft, fine art, boutique and gallery, Quirk, one of Richmond's newest art spaces, is presenting formal exhibitions of wall-hung art amid Space-Age-looking jewelry cases and organically inspired light fixtures suspended from the ceiling. It's an unexpected mix of serious introspection surrounded by a lighthearted atmosphere of hip retail, yet it works thanks to the reverence with which each object is displayed.

Quirk's exhibition "Systems" features work by Randy Toy and Jorge Benitez, Richmond artists selected by the Washington Project for the Arts/Corcoran for its recent exhibition "Options 2005." By arranging the artists' work on facing walls, the gallery hopes to initiate a dialogue about creative urges versus resulting art products. Toy and Benitez both look to the history of art as a means of commenting on their perspective of current culture, but they come up with starkly different bodies of work.

Toy is a graduate student in Virginia Commonwealth University's printmaking program but is already in demand as an exhibiting artist (just this year he has been in three group exhibitions outside of VCU). Here Toy exhibits samples of lithographs originated from his quick studies of Roman, Indian, Tibetan and Chinese art (to name a few) he made while visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The lithographs are meant to duplicate as closely as possible Toy's simple line drawings describing objects or images on objects, often homing in on visages of the human form.

Jorge Benitez's "Welcome" (above) and Randy Toy's "Life Drawing #68," while seemingly disparate, both look to the history of art as a way of commenting on current culture.

Consistently representing what he sees in simple contour and in similar scale, Toy downplays the associated cultural and historical context of his source material. He doesn't elaborate on style and often represents only portions of what he sees. From the frozen action of a Chinese figure being bitten by a dragon to the grimace of an African mask, these minimal images define only

the most essential shapes and marks represented before him. Resembling the elegant line drawings Picasso produced through the '50s, Toy's pared-down images uncover iconography with universal appeal.

In his color-saturated oil paintings, Benitez walks the line between realism and surrealism, posing himself as an inhabitant of a strange landscape.

He paints deep and vast horizons using centuries-old rules of perspective and optical illusion. His scenes convey an eerie calm despite the dominance of intimidating architecture that diminishes the human scale to that of an ant.

In "Welcome," a monumental gate marks a threshold to unknown territory. As if planted by totalitarian authority, it mocks the lowly passengers of a passing car. Like Third Reich architects, who recycled elements of classical architecture to align the new Germany with Plutonic ideals, the unseen authority to which Benitez alludes is as just as menacing.

Dipping into the pool of history and coming up with something of the moment, Toy and Benitez are enjoying their time as agents of postmodernism. **S**

"System" runs through Dec. 23 at Quirk Gallery, 311 W. Broad St. Call 644-5450.



True Colors

Randy Toy is both present and absent at Main Art.

by Steven L. Jones

In the popular imagination, Western culture celebrates the self while Eastern culture denies it. People in the West strive to rise above the crowd and accomplish great things, while those from the East try to blend peacefully into the crowd, content to be a useful fraction of a greater whole.

Richmond artist Randy Toy is a Westerner whose work is immersed in Eastern religion and philosophy. His one-man show at Main Art Gallery, "Mixelecon: Prints and Constructions," strikes an intriguing balance between notions of individuality and anonymity.

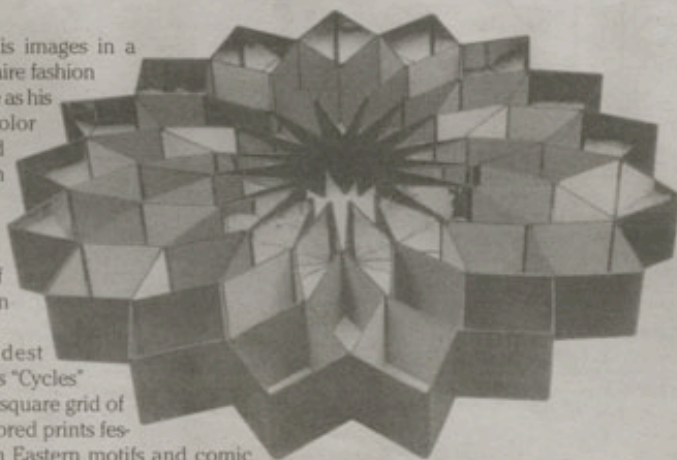
"Mixelecon" is an invented word meant, Toy says, to evoke "the idea of change." It's an appropriate theme because his work is in transition. His colorful, exquisitely crafted works are created with printmaking technology — a process far more anonymous in character than painting — and the layered symbolic motifs that make up his imagery are explicitly Hindu or Buddhist. Toy

organizes his images in a nondoctrinaire fashion as subjective as his dynamic color choices and melds them to the bold design and austere dynamics of Western minimalism.

The oldest piece here is "Cycles" (2001) — a square grid of 42 multicolored prints festooned with Eastern motifs and comic portraits of the artist, who smiles beatifically like a friendly bodhisattva. Its diffuse imagery, noncentral composition and breezy tone contrast markedly with more recent works.

These include a set of 14-inch-by-14-inch prints wherein symbolic motifs are compactly layered over concentric geometric shapes inside a mandalalike circle. Some of these motifs are Eastern, but others — a human brain floating in a field of intense blues, three eyeballs hovering over a circle of red flame — seem lifted from dreams.

Imagery is mostly jettisoned in "Element 5: Convergence" (2004), a large multipart



Viewed from above, "Mixology 68: Harbinger" resembles both a stained-glass window and a blooming flower — associations of wholeness and renewal that equally reference Eastern and Western brands of spirituality.

geometric work whose formal rigor yields a slightly chilly result, warmed only by Toy's luscious colors — rich yellow-ocher hues that range from sunny mustard to butter-scotch brown.

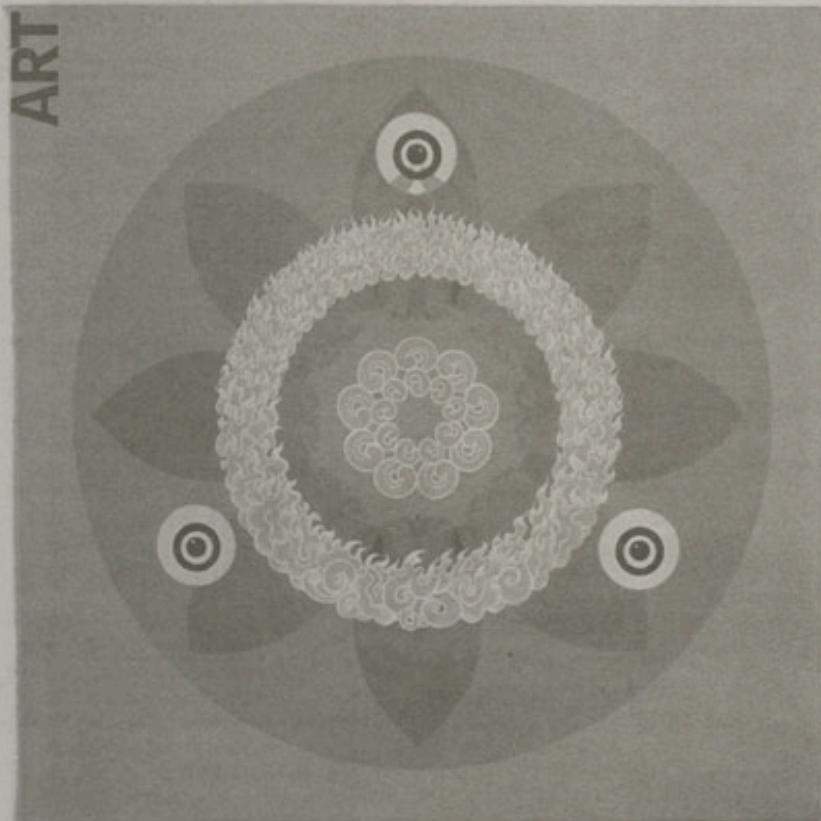
More inviting are two works that push the artist's style into three dimensions. In "Mixology 391" (2003), hundreds of tiny paper squares, each stained a different color, are stacked in a pile inside a plexiglas cube on a sculpture stand. Toy's aesthetic is reduced here to essential components: the elegantly deckled edge of his torn paper, the intense hues of his high-saturation color.

In "Mixology 68: Harbinger" (2004), two accordion-style "books" are hinged together so that their 68 "pages" — small prints in a variety of satiny colors — form diamond-shaped cells. Viewed from above, the piece resembles both a stained-glass window and a blooming flower — associations of wholeness and renewal that equally reference Eastern and Western brands of spirituality.

"Cycles" and the "Mixology" pieces are the two poles of "Mixelecon." In the former, playfully juxtaposed images explicitly link Toy to the Eastern ideas that absorb and motivate him. In the latter, these ideas are communicated in purely formal terms, and Toy recedes into the background. Either direction is potentially fruitful. **S**

"Mixelecon: Prints and Constructions" runs through Oct. 30 at Main Art Gallery, 1537 W. Main St.

ART



In "Indelible; Element #2," Toy's cold geometric work is warmed by its rich red and orange hues.

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nick day

Printmaking is often dismissed as painting's poor relation... an inflexible, process-driven craft that artists practice to develop ideas and maintain cash flow between paintings. Actually, the technical rigor of the medium can be an asset. It precludes grandiose scale and demands formal and conceptual precision, qualities sometimes lacking in contemporary painting.

Highly regarded by local printmakers for his exacting craftsmanship and formal gifts, printmaker RANDY TOY is one of Richmond's most intriguing but least-known artists. A rare exhibit of his work, "Mixelecon: Prints and Constructions," opens at Main Art Gallery this Friday and shouldn't be missed. In exuberantly colorful lithographs, Toy layers motifs derived from Buddhism and Hinduism according to idiosyncratic systems and

mathematic formulae. In "Mixelecon," look for Toy to expand his vision into three dimensions, adapting his style and subject matter to print-based sculptural objects, like "Mixology 68," pictured.

While his work's decorative design typically provokes

admiration, its religious subject matter often elicits the question "Is this guy for real?" He is. Toy describes his work as "a system of guideposts created to communicate personal truths and philosophy." The result could be vapid New Age fluff or offensive cross-cultural pillaging, but Toy's humility, sincerity and humor save his work. "Mixelecon" runs Oct. 1-30 at Main Art Gallery, located at 1537 W. Main St.

— Steven L. Jones

**FIRST
FRIDAY
PICK:**

**RANDY
TOY AT
MAIN ART**