

## Jackson has a few words for modernism

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Almost 50 years after the waning of the modern impulse in visual art, we still often see contemporary creations according to what hard-line modernists said the most progressive art should or should not do.

Take Carol Jackson, in her solo exhibition at Gallery 400 at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her painstakingly created works are distinctive precisely for how they depart from modernist pronouncements regarding content and materials. Were it not for those departures, they would seem to be curiosities that come from nowhere and look like odd protest art.

As it is, the best of Jackson's work on view gains from having violated old strictures, as we assign positive value to her working in hand-tooled leather with words and representational images. The sense of her results being curiosities also diminishes as soon as we realize her component of protest is twofold, going against notions that limited art for the first half of the 20th Century as well as the language of commercialization that has affected American society ever since.

Jackson's most arresting pieces are signs for household products and condominium developments. However, while retaining some of the signs' original elements of design, the artist has replaced all the words with quotations from (or echoes of) epic literature. The phrases' grandiosity achieves so great a disjunction with the everyday images that generations of viewers accustomed to irony automatically comprehend an act of criticism.

Modernism forbade words except for the sake of design under the grounds that the natural way to present stories or essays was not through visual art but literature. Representation of the world was managed better by photography than painting. And such material as leather was thought to belong solely to the world of craft, which was compromised by function and stood apart from—and considerably below—the so-called fine arts.

The joining of words and representations by means of a craft medium therefore gives Jackson's work a strength that goes beyond appearance, and such strength is maintained only when the three components are yoked together.

But remove the words while keeping the representation and leather, and you have luxuriant but mute wall and floor pieces such as *Escape the Day* and *Ongoing*. Remove the words and leather while keeping the representation, and you have drawings and gouaches in which the critical edge looks blunted by jokiness. The jokiness comes from both the style of drawing and Jackson's content. The style is simplified, akin to book illustrations; the content, particularly in works representing members of what may be taken as a college fraternity, is ambiguous. So in the gouaches we are brought close to yet denied the clarifying atmosphere of words, which is to say, meaning.

A gallery handout presents the artist as a moralist. For a moralist to lack meaning would seem to be fatal. But even those who urge right conduct go on larks, which here include even a cutout gazebo that intersects with a painted rural landscape.

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