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Unfinished Business

Linen Building hosts unfinished works by 19 Idaho artists

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MARIA CHAVEZ

Ted Apel's clicking switches are a sound addition to Unfinished.

In the sun-drenched Gallery at the Linen Building Jan. 2, artists Amy O'Brien and Eli Craven sat casually conversing, no trace of panic in their measured tones.

It was the day before the group exhibition, Unfinished, opened at the Linen Building, and little was left unfinished. For a show that features uncompleted works from 19 Idaho artists and was organized in two short months, this was no small feat.

In early October 2012, Black Hunger members Craven and Maria Chavez struck up a conversation about unfinished artwork with Modern Art co-organizer O'Brien.

"I have so many things lying around or tucked away, where I don't know how to take it further or I didn't know I what I was doing in the first place and I didn't feel confident enough to wrap it up," said Craven.

"I have a lot of stuff that's unfinished," Chavez added. "I've always felt like I had more than everybody, but I think a lot of people feel that."

"And then we started to think about, 'What do other artists have in their studios?'" O'Brien said. "We made a list and started approaching people and did studio visits."

The trio stopped by a number of artists' studios to sift through their unfinished work. While artist Charles Gill's old projects were fairly organized--he inked the words "Abandoned 6/22/04" authoritatively across one folder--Bill Lewis gave the trio free rein to rummage through old flat file drawers full of unfinished work, pulling out piles of paint-splashed papers.

"There were a lot of people that actually do destroy things that they're not happy with, or paint over," said O'Brien. "But what we were interested in were the things that they didn't destroy but that they couldn't finish for some reason, things that they would hang on to."

Glance around the gallery space, and it's easy to see that the interpretation of Unfinished varies wildly. For Troy Passey, it's a few paintings missing his signature phrases layered over the top; for Brooke Burton, it's a shrink-wrapped still life of apples quietly rotting away; and for Kirsten Furlong, it's an assortment of felted animal adornments.

For many of life's undertakings, there's a logical and immutable end. But with art, that line is more tenuous.

"Work I consider unfinished is work that I still want to fix," Kelly Packer wrote in an artist statement for the show. "It's work that leaves me unsettled and anxious."

Lewis defined it more abstractly: "A relationship with an ambiguous ending: a barely acknowledged regret: evidence of aborted engagement: a relentless nagging: an interrupted journey: a dormant seed."

Elijah Jensen-Lindsey penned an astute aphorism: "Art is a perfect expression of the imperfect soul; a task no one is suited for. A defeat instigated before the battle has even begun."

Standing before his large, psychedelic mixed-media painting, "Sacred Bone," Jensen-Lindsey let out a weighty sigh.

"I wouldn't be showing this to anyone if it wasn't in the context of the show at all. ... The reason is because it was really an emotional piece; all of this was happening subconsciously," Jensen-Lindsey explained.

Jensen-Lindsey started "Sacred Bone" with an obsessive fury in 2010, after a car accident shattered his body and took his mother's life.

"I was painting this, and in the middle of it, my body just started shutting down. Muscles, just everything was not working right and I was in constant pain and I couldn't get out of bed," Jensen-Lindsey said. "My body had basically revolted against me, so I put the piece away, and then I revived it recently when I was starting to meet with a psychologist."

Jensen-Lindsey realized that he had unconsciously been painting his inner pain.

"What I had been doing here was painting what was going on inside my body without knowing it. ... I was basically pointing at places where pain was."

His psychologist explained that when he completes the piece, he might find resolution to his pain.

"This is part of why it's not finished: I'm a little intimidated by it. ... That's a difficult thing to just decide it's done. And then what? When do I start feeling better?" Jensen-Lindsey asked.

But not all of the pieces in the show carry such weight. Sound artist Ted Apel offered a jumbled Styrofoam box full of electrical switches.

"Ted Apel's is sort of unfinished because he never knew what to do with these items in the box," explained Craven. "He bought all these sound switches; they're the kind of switches that you would install into a clapper. ... When you hook them together, they make a little clicking noises."

Amid the bustle of bundled First Thursday-goers at the show's opening Jan. 3, Apel's faint clicks could just be made out--like quiet raindrops on a metal roof.

Surveying the gallery space, Chavez' face lit up with a smile.

"I've just been so excited ever since the work started arriving that it just hasn't faded," Chavez beamed. "I'm really happy; I love the diversity of artists and the diversity of their maturity and the different media, as well."

Ultimately, Chavez, Craven and O'Brien were reassured to learn that other working artists experience similar difficulties in their creative processes.

"Sometimes you feel that there are people out there that have figured out a method of working where they just get stuff done; they just crank it out. And you're like, 'How did they do that?'" Chavez said. "But then you find that they struggle, as well."

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