

'Bilingual' speaks eclectic, collective language of film in contemporary art

Group exhibit captures artists at point in history

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"Bilingual: Art at the Intersection of Painting and Video," at the Columbia College Glass Curtain Gallery, is a show of work by 22 artists that is memorable less for particular pieces than an aggregate that explores a moment in contemporary art no other local exhibition has treated in depth.

The show includes paintings and videos, drawings and films. But rather than oppose them, breaking them into categories of "old" and "new," the exhibition indicates how the one has grown out of the other, achieving a mode of storytelling that often has been extended and heightened by having more or less traditional handwork spun out over time.

Then the exhibition also shows how this development is a two-way street, by presenting examples of contemporary paintings that have been influenced, either structurally or imagistically, by film. So, broadly speaking, here are paintings that have come to life, in addition to films that have been stilled, and the two together make for an exhibition at once engaging and challenging.

Easiest to comprehend is Waafa Bilal's "Absinthe Drinker," in which a female figure in a famous painting by Edgar Degas is digitally activated to turn to address the viewer. The act of painting, as opposed to the finished product, is the subject of Patte Loper's "Tween," which has a time-lapse video show the creation of the wall painting it sits beside. Then, soon enough, painting as a subject drops out — but its abstract forms remain, in videos by Alison Ruttan and Terence Hannum.

The opposite pole is represented by Marcelino Stuhmer's nine black-and-white paintings that synopsise a fight sequence from "The Manchurian Candidate," John Frankenheimer's 1962 film. The silhouettes of bird, bell tower and Victorian mansion against a purple sky likewise are owing to the movies, which have given them to "Hellhouse," Peter Rostovsky's 2002 painting. A scene from the chariot race of William Wyler's 1959 film also is translated into cryptic horizontal bars in Eddy De Vos' 2003 canvas, "Ben Hur."

A low-tech incursion of painting into film occurs in Fraser Taylor's "Crevice," created by painting directly onto film leader that is transferred to video. The high-tech version is Jeremy Blake's "Liquid Villa," a widescreen silent video in which images of pre-modern architecture are slickly transformed into motifs familiar from modern abstract painting.

The greatest number of pieces are animations at various levels of drawing, from rudimentary (Kylie Baker) to masterly (William Kentridge). These have the most ambitious storytelling, which in "Commute" by Joshua Mosley even includes something one scarcely would expect: an appearance by Rene Descartes, the 17th Century philosopher and mathematician.

Several of the artists have, of course, appeared in solo exhibitions, but it will be a long time before they're assembled again in a show that so clearly illuminates their time in history.