

## **Exhibition by Sarah M. Jones, Sarah Hadley, & Allison Rae Butkus at Damen Studio**

by Joshua Siegal

Located in the first floor of a courtyard building in the quaint but bustling Lincoln Square neighborhood, Damen Studio represents a collective of artists taking their work out of the gallery and into their own hands, as it were. The current exhibit features work by three of the four proprietors of Damen Studio and is a test of the idea that visual artists can successfully promote their own work without help from patrons, critics, or (possibly) the public.

The gallery/studio is open for viewing one day a week, and when I showed up at the appointed time, the doors were still locked. I called the number posted, and some unidentified person informed me that someone else would be there soon to open the place up. If I had been looking to buy a piece of art, I might have immediately started looking elsewhere.

This notwithstanding, the do-it-yourself philosophy of the gallery also created a homey environment, with the gallery staff (also one of the artists) willing to chat extensively about the art, sometimes while working on a piece in the back of the small space, which serves as a studio as well. Fans of the process of art will find a voyeuristic pleasure in the possibility of catching one of the artists at work, just a few feet away from their finished pieces, which are professionally framed and installed. Despite the name of the space, it is not merely a studio that has finished works hung; it is more a gallery where pieces are presented – and in which the artists work. It is not clear whether the artists at this new enterprise have intentionally exposed themselves in this way or whether this is the result of an attempt to pool resources and economize. Whether the gallery (and indeed, the artists) can be successful in such an environment remains to be seen.

But to the art – without which it is hard to imagine any gallery flourishing. Sarah M. Jones presents various series of mixed media paintings that are interesting but at times

lack emotional resonance. Her “Number Nine” and “Number Nine Revisited” beg a third painting that might be entitled “Number Nine Synthesized”. The first of these painted works has a flat composition that uses blocks of space and competing diagonal shapes along with what seem to be block-letter stencils or possibly stickers used as masques. It makes good use of the tones in the red – yellow spectrum, but gradations of color seem unrelated to the carved cross-hatching and somewhat jumbled composition. True to its name, there is a single number 9 in the painting, and the word “RARE”. The second of the two works is less interesting but has more cohesion, sticking with a mostly blue – black color scheme that works well around the lighter-colored textual elements. There are more number 9s in this piece, which allow some play with the title, although I was a bit distracted by the whitish script at the top of the piece that reads “waking up to the sound of us breaking up.” Much stronger in this painting is the intersection of two dark lines that each run the length and breadth of the piece, respectively. Drawing on the edges of her canvas serves Jones well in other works at this exhibition, particularly “Chaos Redefined” and “Chaos Redefined II”. In these paintings, also mixed-media, Jones uses much more complicated composition, defining areas of space and nesting spaces within one another. In these pieces, she has mostly abandoned diagonal forces, and the resulting lack of competition between diagonal and horizontal/vertical (a battle which comes to a head in her “Pops is Best”) has allowed her room in which to create more fluid and cohesive structures within the paintings. It also gives her spaces within the works in which her brush strokes can flower, literally, into spirals, meshed drips of paint, and diagonals-gone-underground; instead of distracting from the works, these provide depth and motion. In the “Chaos Redefined” series, Jones also tightens her control of color, squeezing strong contrasts into narrow peripheral spaces that set off the rest of the image. A new technique of using a hole punch to create layered perforated elements and free-floating spots is promising but could be explored more, as could her command of space between paintings in her triptych, “Series A”. It may be that Jones will have to explore such strengths further in order to move her artwork in a market full of similar style, but if this is the environment that has produced such development, than the gallery can be deemed a success.

Perhaps the most marketable of the works currently in exhibit at Damen Studio are those by Allison Rae Butkus. Her series of two unnamed mixed-media sculptures pulls from the disciplines of bookmaking, furniture, and natural preservation. The pieces in her exhibit call to mind a dual entomological display, a pair of hand-crafted wooden boxes with glass fronts that hold folded paper preserved in epoxy. Butkus has made her works so that the interior is hard to perceive, an effect that I found quite beckoning. To the left, the miniature folded-paper books within the display are folded open and interleaving, with black threads arranged feather-like about them. This case is the darker of the two, the hardest to pierce, visually. In the case on the right, the paper books are tightly constricted, winding around the interior of the piece and cramping one another. In this more claustrophobic work, the interior is lighter and the viewer can plainly see the dollops of epoxy that choke the paperworks. This type of work may allow the gallery to sell pieces – they are contained, are easily understandable yet evocative, and their hand-crafted charm is something that many would pay to have in their homes.

Sarah Hadley provides some interesting photographs of local subjects in her “Rain Series #1-6”, arranged as a dual-layer triptych. All of the images in this series are taken downtown in Chicago, and all of them play with various images of rain as seen through glass. At times, the focus is on the purported subject of the photo, as in “#1”, in which tall, charcoal-colored buildings loom in the fog and a spray dots the glass in the foreground. At times the focus is on the drops themselves: “#3” shows us large watery orbs in close focus as pedestrians blur their color onto the wet street below. Between “#1” and “#3” this transition is brought to bear nicely on the viewer’s attention. Photos “#5” and “#6”, though, are more interesting, using sheets of water over glass to blur lights on the street and create radiating visual echoes of the subject. In a world where digital manipulation runs rampant, it is refreshing to see a photographer working with naturally occurring visual effects. These last two may be better displayed together, apart from the first three. The photograph entitled “#4” seems a bit out of place, a series of diagonal rain streaks at a CTA station; it shares little relation with the first three or the last two, but it does complete a series of six. Hadley’s photography is well presented and mounted, and its technique is an interesting exploration of water and light, but it could go

further. Still, the sense of mood in these photographs is undeniable, the blotting out of the human subjects with water recalls impressionism in its blurry refraction, and someone with a taste for gloomy but intelligent photography might like to own these.

The creators of Damen Studio have made an admirable investment in themselves by funding their own space and using it to both display and create their work. In doing so, they have invited the public a rare chance to glimpse the artistic process along with its product, and this may induce a cache in the art world akin to hanging out with the band backstage. It may also detract from the legitimacy of their enterprise, and it is doubtful whether or not a gallery can succeed without professional management and promotion. If the collective of artists at this gallery can use this space as a development center and do much to welcome the public (especially the surrounding community) into their space, they stand a good chance of success. If not, they may be content to fund an attractive work and display space out of pocket.