

Stew Henderson: Difficult Questions, Easy Answers

By Ken Greenleaf

Over the past few years Stew Henderson has developed a body of work that uses a simple set of materials that, taken together, assemble lines of thought and perception that touch the whole nature of how we structure the way we see things.

There's more here than meets the eye. These pieces, simple assemblies of wood and paint, create questions that are deep and complex and offer answers that are surprising, funny and deeper than they look. They are abstractions that look like things or things that look like abstractions. Or both at once. Or neither.

A good example is "Still Life With Beer." It's fairly large, 48 x 36 inches, and at first view unreadable as anything but repetitive abstract painting. A closer and longer look reveals it is pieces, each carrying a color, fitted together a little like a jigsaw puzzle. These are individual pieces of wood painted and shaped to each other. Repeated pieces that look like beer combine with others that don't, creating a little universe bounded by the work's edges.

The engaging aspect of this body of work is how the viewer's thread of experience reflects the nature of not only visual processing but how the

broader actions of human communication are expressed. You see shapes, lines, pixels, and make sense of what's falling on your retina.

These works seem at first encounter to be pretty noisy but settle, with a bit of brain sorting and a bit of time, into the signal of familiar shapes. The shapes are familiar but don't have lettering or other signifiers. In "At the Library" a simple set of lines reach upward from left to right while colorful vertical shapes fill the opposite direction. The title suggests the image - these are the "books." They are just simple colored shapes with no text. Each of the many colors are separate pieces of wood carefully fitted together. There is no text, no lettering. The things suggested, in this case books on a shelf, are deliberate abstractions of the otherwise familiar objects.

It's pretty clear what these things are what they are but also what they are not - the ordinary stuff of the visual world presented without context. At first look this can be puzzling but it doesn't take long to see that they are renderings that are also abstractions whose color and shape are borrowed from actual things.

This perceptual dissonance reflects communication in every part of life, the signal to noise ratio - you don't know what is being presented until the radio broadcast is rectified into sound range, the James Webb images transformed from infra-red to human perception. So it is with these works.

You perceive what appears to be a blast of color and are directly invited to sort out what the idea and presentation are about.

Two distinct pieces in this group demonstrate the boundaries of Henderson's ideas - "Still Life at the 5 & 10" and "Still Life with Ammunition." "5 & 10" has easy, even nostalgic recognizable objects - a vintage radio, desk, empty jars, all with price tags. It's a comfortable tableaux, a pleasant junk store. "Ammunition," by contrast, is regimented and rectangular, its perspective giving the many shapes and angles depth and substance. The implied solidity of its linear separations make the work rhythmic and a little grim.

A core theme in this body of work is the way it addresses both the history of art and its place in a changing world. Recognizing the subject or purpose of a piece of art from its lines and color goes back at least as far as horses on a cave wall and was part of how pictures were made until photography and the iPhone. By concentrating on just physical edges and color, Henderson sidesteps the puzzlement that has been hovering in the air since the beginning of the 20th century - what is the function of a work of visual art when a selfie can contain more information than a Leonardo? His answer is to create works that require his viewer to become aware of the boundaries that delineate each part of his subjects and to engage in the mental exercise that make it what it is - luggage, cheap items for sale,

boxes of bullets.

One gets the sense with some of these that while you're working out how to read the image that the painting is reading you. "Dish Towels" is a little like that - its color choices and vertical lines start the feeling of '70's abstraction but it's clear these are renderings of real objects made from curious disparate parts. In this case the parts are, in the real world, separate pieces connected together so that they are at once clear and tangible while being puzzling.

There are tinges of the times we live in that Henderson brings. One nearly abstract piece kept me puzzled for some time. "The Gift" is, I think, a rendering of gift cards on a rack.

Henderson's entanglement engages the viewer with the actual process of the narrative - these things are part of a story, or stories, that become commentaries about the stuff of daily life. What are the bullets for? Who is competing for beer sales and why? How did giving gifts become the exchange of plastic cards carrying invisible value? Are the towels and neckties just a common mess? Easy questions, difficult answers.

The pictures from the western desert may bring Henderson's method into a different focus, a sort of binary flatness that creates its own depth. No real perspective but definitely some distance. They feel dry and empty,

even alone. Someone has been there, done something and left. One of them even has outlines of flying saucers. No questions here, and definitely no answers. None needed.

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