

Art & Film

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Adrian Eisenhower painted Cleveland's skyline without creating an instant cliché.

Diverse Abattoir Gallery offers a delightful exhibit of area artists

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It's routine for regional art galleries around this time of year to exhibit a wide range of relatively affordable artworks suitable for gifts during the holiday season.

But few galleries in recent memory have done as good a job at this kind of show as Abattoir Gallery, which opened this year in the Clark-Fulton neighborhood on the city's West Side.

Through Saturday, Jan. 23, the gallery is holding a delightful exhibition of small-format works by a cohort of excellent artists based in Cleveland, Oberlin, Kent, and other communities.

With more than 60 works by 37 artists, the exhibition is an exquisite sampler of bite-sized, gift-worthy objects. It also continues the effort by gallery founders Lisa Kurzner and Rose Burlingham to establish Abattoir as a center of gravity for contemporary visual art in the region — a role left open following the retirement of longtime Cleveland art dealer William Busta in 2015.

The Abattoir exhibition focuses on artists the gallery represents, artists the gallery might represent in the future, and artists who have studio space in the Hildebrandt Building at 3619 Walton Ave., where the gallery opened in June. (The gallery takes its name from the onetime meat-packing operation housed in the complex).

To keep things safe during the stay-at-home advisory announced by Cuyahoga County, which ends Dec. 17, the dealers are offering Zoom or FaceTime visits by appointment.

The Abattoir show is notable for its overall high quality, its diverse range of styles and sensibilities, its combination of visual wonder and humor, and its celebration of smallness.

Artworks on view provide delectable moments of revelation on an intimate scale.

Painter Adrian Eisenhower, for example, is represented by 20 small paintings in oil on panels measuring 5 by 7 inches that depict various landscapes in and around the city.

Eisenhower takes evident delight in capturing abbreviated summaries of anything that catches his eye, whether it's the Cleveland skyline, a sunset over Lake Erie, a view of the Detroit-Superior Bridge shrouded in mist, or orange barrels on a road under repair.

Eisenhower paints familiar scenes with a consistently lively sense of touch, and without resorting to clichés. It's as if he were suddenly seeing the city for the first time.

A trio of watercolors by the abstract painter Scott Olson focus on interlocking curved and straight-edge shapes painted in muted harmonies, with softly visible brushstrokes that produce a kind of trembling, quivering vitality.

Gianna Commito, another abstractionist, is represented by a composition in flat, razor-sharp stripes, bars and circles, painted in a cool palette of grays, pinks, violets, blues and black.

The painting plays with tensions between flatness and depth produced by the interaction between shapes and colors. Especially enjoyable is the way in which Commito tiptoes up to the four corners of her painting, providing a variety of solutions to the resolution of visual tensions at the outer limits of her composition.

A pair of gouache and graphite drawings on paper, by John Pearson, resemble designs for semaphore flags for ships at sea, ready to communicate important messages



An abstract painting by Gianna Commito features razor sharp edges, tensions between flatness and depth, and some intriguing compositional gambits at its corners.

Review

What's up: "Small Works," more than 60 objects by 37 Northeast Ohio artists.

Venue: Abattoir

Where: 3619 Walton Ave., Cleveland

When: Through Saturday, Jan. 23.

Admission: Free. Call 216-820-1260 or 646-229-0998, or go to abattoirgallery.com.

in some new kind of visual language. Painted in 1979, they're as fresh as if they were painted yesterday.

Pearson is also represented by a small, cross-shaped construction from his "Shinto" series of 1997, painted in resonant tones of black and dark blue, in which a vertical rectangular hollow sliced through the center of the piece creates a mysterious shadow.

Adjacent to Pearson's piece is Ryan Dewey's humorous drawing, "How Much Cat Litter Does it Take to Cover Cleveland?" a work in which the artist spells out a logical step-by-step answer in words neatly written in block letters.

His conclusion: About 14.9 trillion bags of cat litter, or enough to serve the estimated U.S. cat population for 15 years.

Some of the art in the show engages with social issues, as in Andrew Gonzalez's sheet of faux food stamps, imprinted with his own name, that hangs from the gallery ceiling on a coat hanger.

There's also a good deal of lighthearted work, including Erykah Townsend's celebration of a chair and a clock based on characters from the children's program, "Pee-Wee's Playhouse."

The show's general thrust is that it presents a collection of strong talents with work that feels like a solid representation of each artist's general feeling.

Just as important is spirit of assurance and intelligence that the show radiates. It's a tutorial in selectivity that addresses a wide variety of tastes, viewpoints and artistic approaches, while establishing Abattoir as a gallery with a very sharp eye for quality.

In other words, it's a good place to get an educated eye.

MOVIE REVIEW

'Zappa' captures spirit of legendary artist

Katie Walsh *Tribune News Service*

Alex Winter's "Zappa," a documentary biopic of the experimental rock pioneer, composer, and activist Frank Zappa is a sprawling at times shaggy work, testing the outer limits of mood and tone, tangents and details. In fact, it's a bit like a Frank Zappa song. The film reflects the work of the man himself thanks, in large part, to the wealth of archival material from the enormous Zappa vault, to which Winter and producer Glen Zipper were granted access by the Zappa family. The film is produced by Zappa's son and current steward of the Zappa Family Trust, Ahmet Zappa (who also has a producer credit, along with his mother, Gail, on the 2016 Zappa doc "Eat That Question: Frank Zappa in His Own Words").

"Zappa" is a film that tries to wrap itself around the life and enormous career of Frank Zappa, who died of prostate cancer in 1993 at age 52. But, due to his prolific and tremendously varied musical output — on 62 albums he released in his lifetime and 53 posthumously — the film feels like just a primer on his work, which wasn't just "rock music," but theater, comedy, avant-garde performance art, visual design, animation and filmmaking.

As a part of utilizing the Zappa vault for this film, Winter and Zipper set out to preserve many of the materials contained within, and the sheer breadth of the archive is a documentarian's dream. As a young man Zappa was obsessed with film and editing, and the film contains footage that goes back to Zappa's childhood, including early zombie flicks he made starring his siblings and parents. Interspersed with these snippets of family home movies and amateur films is archival footage from the postwar 1950s military-industrial complex in which he grew up, playing with gas masks provided to the family while his father, a chemist, worked at a mustard gas factory.

This looming existential dread and the small, conservative California towns in which he was raised were a powerful force against which Zappa reacted, with his music that constantly defied convention and conformity. As his former percussionist Ruth Underwood says in an interview, "he was a walking mass of contradictions but he was consistent in those contradictions." He was a wild man with a psychedelic imagination who eschewed drug use, and an anti-establishment artist with a keen sense of business acumen.

Out of interviews with his closest collaborators and former bandmates, television interviews, recordings of live concerts and performances, behind the scenes footage and interviews with his wife Gail (who died in 2015) emerges a patchwork portrait of a complicated man, an exacting artist and a wholly singular visionary.

His bandmates assert that he was a demanding songwriter and bandleader, constantly striving for perfection, rare to dole out compliments.

Zappa's trademark bluntness of speech seems to have permeated his entire circle, his own radical honesty creating a safe space for everyone to speak as freely as possible.

That bluntness is a delight to witness against late night talk show hosts, and becomes a powerful tool in his later years when he leaned into activism, testifying in Senate hearings about labeling records with explicit content, and becoming a Czech cultural emissary after the Velvet Revolution.

If the outsize legacy of his work bears any consistency, it's in the purest expression of his vision, whatever that might have been. Zappa repeatedly states that he made the music that he wanted, needed, to hear.

If others want to listen, he's happy to provide the recordings as a public service. In "Zappa," this legendary artist's uncompromising nature is bracing, bold and utterly refreshing.

"Zappa"

3.5 stars

MPPA rating: Unrated

Cast: Frank Zappa, Gail Zappa, Steve Vai, Ruth Underwood and more

Director: Alex Winter

Running time: 2 hours, 7 minutes

Playing on Cleveland Cinemas and Cleveland Cinematheque