

Daniel Tacker's "The City Loves You" a mixed-media media critique

By Fredric Koepfel

Thursday, August 11, 2011

One of the mixed-media paintings in Daniel Tacker's exhibition "The City Loves You" at Dixon Gallery and Gardens is titled "Branded." That name seems not just appropriate but also prescient for a show that is deeply entrenched in yet critical of the contemporary notion of brands and branding, of copyrighting ourselves to protect and enhance the image we present to the world via magazines, newspapers, television, movies and the Internet, especially in the guise of social networking.

Displayed in the museum's Mallory and Wurtzburger galleries, devoted for the past several years to exhibitions of local and regional artists, Tacker's show encapsulates the cultural hurly-burly and urban dynamism in which people are constantly, in fact violently, bombarded by a relentless multiplicity of pictures, sound bites and influences, particularly evident in an apocalyptic, chaotic piece like "City of Angels."

"I try to reflect that aspect," said Tacker, who uses acrylic paint, markers, pen and ink, spray paint, stencils, graffiti and other forms of illustrating media on energetic and colorful canvases that pulsate with swirls, drips and splotches of pigment and swooping lines. "We can't get away from all the electronic and digital messages that are aimed at us all the time."

Tacker, 33, is a native Memphian who grew up in Germantown and attended the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, earning, in 2002, a bachelor of fine arts degree in media arts, which included film, photography and graphic design. After getting his degree, he returned to Memphis.

"I started making art when I was about 10," Tacker said, "by copying comic books and comic strips. I especially loved 'Calvin & Hobbes.' I found some of those drawings in the attic not long ago, and they seemed all right. I guess though that I've learned a lot since then."

At the same time that he was attempting comic strip art, Tacker was using his parents' old Polaroid camera to take pictures of everything that he thought was visually interesting.

It's more than just coincidence that while Tacker's formal art work mirrors our society's obsession with self-image and branding, his job is working in visual graphics and packaging for Cyber Graphics in Southeast Memphis; in other words, at work, Tacker creates packaging for branded snack foods, while in his studio he satirizes

the culture that demands those products.

"I guess there's some irony there," Tacker said, "but everything I do requires certain skills, and I'll work with any skill I've been exposed to, packaging or advertising or graffiti or whatever. I use it all in my work."

The artist has been especially interested in graffiti recently. "I've been doing a lot of research, not that I condone the destruction of property, but I'm fascinated with the incredible handwriting and signature-making of graffiti artists, and I've begun using that style and imagery too."

Viewers can see that influence in "Branded" and in "What Happened." In the latter, a man, a woman and a little boy, painted in black against a white background, are surrounded by and besieged by swift-moving arrow symbols and a seething network of lines, circles, dots, cryptic signatures, swirls and swoops of paint. While the implications are existential — we have no idea what ever happens to us — the piece could also reiterate the complicated and unreadable nature of contemporary culture, an entity so dynamic and complex that ordinary people scarcely have a chance of comprehending.

Daniel Tacker, 'The City Loves You'

At Dixon Gallery and Gardens, 4339 Park, through Oct. 16. Call 761-5250.



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