

# DISPLACED

## Cross Currents @ Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center

by Natalie Haddad



**B**efore the exhibition even begins, there are several means of approaching Cross Currents at the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center. The theme of the show is roughly the influence of international migration on the aesthetic of an artist: All five contributors — Shiva Ahmadi, Sacha Eckes, Sean Gallagher, Dick Goody and Julia Rüss — have held residence in more than one country, and painter Hartmut Auster, who conceived and curated it, came to Detroit from Berlin in 1998.

Whether geography engenders a discernible collective aesthetic or the viewer projects his own ethnological preconceptions onto the work is unclear. What thus emerges is a look at the psychology of perception that — without some pathos — threatens to undercut the artwork. That the art withstands the theme's duality speaks to its strength but, more so, to the mediating presence of the curator. Cross Currents negotiates the Möbius strip of influence. "I wanted to do something more concentrated on drawing because I feel like my work has a lot to do with it," Auster explains. "And I had this idea: What can I relate to? It has a certain biographical thought in it, that you meet people, they come and go, but somehow what finds us together are certain aspects in the work, and memories and other things. Also, I wanted to have five strong positions in their own right."

Ahmadi was born in Iran and studied art at Azad University in Tehran before relocating to Detroit and receiving her MFA at Wayne State University. Her brooding, minimal portraits, in earthy layers of resin, marker and ink, converged the opposing forces of repression and rebellion in last year's Detroit Now exhibition at Meadow Brook Art Gallery. For Cross Currents she revisits her philosophical fountainheads — religion and gender — with a new body of work.

Politicalism is more contiguous than integral in the pieces, the public adaptation of her identity. Ahmadi's gender and religion are private before they're public, yet they're public by choice — the statements elucidates the competition between the collective (all those who identify with the work) opposed to conflating the two, the work projects an ideology of individualism against a landscape of conformity (in the repetition of icons), mobilized as a political stance.

Born in Belgium, Eckes grew up between Belgium and San Francisco, and more recently moved to Detroit (she's since returned to San Francisco). Though her work has roots in cartooning, she's an illustrator and fine artist who reconciles the styles by awkwardly inverting design into itself. The characters in Cross Currents function as the shadows of their commercial counterparts. Increasingly austere — bordering on dissolution — as they navigate a nowhere realm, in search of the illusion of intangibles of our own nowheres. Isolation and home are tentative themes in her work: While her characters are trapped in the dregs of an anonymous gray sphere, they're evidently reluctant to escape it, thus illuminating a universal sense of ennui.

Goody, currently the director of Meadow Brook Art Gallery, came to Detroit from England around two decades ago. His paintings (the most expressionistic of this bunch) are manically stylized angles, spheres and extreme perspective that of their environs, all lines and luminous color. Visually, they have something in common with American art of the '80s, but they're quicker and shrewder, rife with intellectual matter and irony that's flashed and then, inevitably, yanked away. Con-

templation is an indulgence of the elite, and elitism is incapacitated in this context.

"[The work] looks accessible, but actually it is not so easy," Auster says of Goody's work. "It's an amalgam of a lot of different styles. And you have those symbols, like the figure, and they are so displaced. There's so much you can interpret." There's an anarchic spirit that seems somewhat fitting for an artist who migrated from the approximate birthplace of the Sex Pistols to that of the Stooges. Nevertheless, it's banality that empowers the works, or rather its postmodern exalta-

tion. In a stroke eerily perceptive of the evolution of Americanism, the blank ferocity of the punk is now that of the bourgeoisie.

Gallagher was born in Calgary and grew up between Canada, England and the United States; he moved to Berlin in the mid '90s, where he studied art at the Hochschule der Künste under Georg Baselitz, among others. Displacement is an explicit but strange presence in his work: a disquieting normality that emerges on the isolated periphery of life, then vanishes. Gallagher's scenarios are ambiguous, but his execution is fastidious, a symptom of control that, here, connotes control of an alien environment.

"[Gallagher] has this very rough painting style and very detailed. Plus it has a kind of Surrealist feel to it," Auster explains. "Indeed, Surrealism plays a nominal role in Gallagher's aesthetic — his noirish black-and-white cross-hatching with esoteric detail (which loosens around the subjects and suggests a cryptic shorthand) emerges from its traditions. Where Surrealism sought eccentricity, however, Gallagher's scenarios seem to stumble upon it, something like the discovery of a severed ear in *Blue Velvet*. There are no real implications of foul play, though, just a matrix of place expanding into an indefinite horizon."

Rüss is another Hochschule der Künste alumnus. Born in Germany, she relocated to San Francisco in 1998 where she cofounded a digital design firm Designmille. The digital influence is evident in her fine art, technically and aesthetically; the work is simultaneously imminent and disappearing, transitory images that are instantly inventoried and absorbed into the global system.

Though her sensibility articulates an evasive relationship with location, Rüss's places are ubiquitous. Her subject matter comes from photographs she takes in intermediate spots: Views from airplane windows, train stations, clouds and plains that neither begin nor end. Amid the halcyon purgatories of her paintings, perforated by languid washes of sunlight and sky, location is not only irrelevant — it's detrimental. It could be her migration from Berlin to California, but Rüss's any-egalitarian expanses beyond. **RDW**

Cross Currents runs through May 21. For more information, call 248.644.0866 or visit [www.bbartscenter.org](http://www.bbartscenter.org).