

Reviews of two exhibitions

“The Shape of Things” with the art of Stan Slutsky and “Somewhere - Anywhere” with the art of Sheila Elias

By Candice Russell, art critic

The vibrancy of the South Florida art scene is reinforced with two intriguing exhibitions at the Coral Springs Museum of Art through December 12, 2009. They focus on the work of two individuals who live in the region, a man and a woman, with radically different sensibilities and approaches to self-expression. Yet what they share is a fidelity to a point of view expressive of personal concerns.

“The Shape of Things” is all about color, geometric forms and surgical precision in arranging those forms so as to create optical illusions. Stan Slutsky of Delray Beach is the mastermind behind these works that seem to be one thing, but are really something else. Do the eight rows of two-inch by three-inch rectangles in the mixed media “Music” (2009) only appear to follow the museum visitor who steps in one direction or another? Are they moving through some mechanical device hidden from view?

Inherently mysterious and intentionally playful, Slutsky’s pieces make this a child-friendly show, perfect for a family outing. His two-dimensional pieces that seem to become sculpturally three-dimensional are akin to pulsating board games, awaiting discovery and explanation. They require careful examination like “Sphere II” (2008), a mixed media work in the shape of a white circle adorned with rows of squares, only in the center, and rectangles. One is tempted to think that the middle bulges out, which it actually does due to the arrangement of spacers holding the circles and squares at different levels.

Artistic trickery is fun in the hands of Slutsky, whose sense of playfulness is inspired by a life-long love of magic. Most pieces exude an energy that seems to lift up off the walls and challenge the person trying to figure them out as to his means of conception, ways of construction, and planned-for result. That sense of bursting forth, akin to a pregnant woman’s belly at nine months and a week overdue, is found in “Round” (1994), an acrylic on canvas of a circle with squares and rectangles. It’s a checkerboard of blue, purple, pink, mauve, orange, red, and yellow squares and rectangles interspersed with white squares and rectangles.

He is capable of toning things down, most noticeably in the serene acrylic on canvas whimsically titled “Music to My Eyes” (1994). The harmonious gradations in color in this painting with same-sized rectangles, from orange to brown to black and blue to green to yellow, have a calming effect like visual meditation. There’s a wiggly femininity to “Ribbons” (2003), an acrylic on canvas with sensuously curving lines in pink, purple, orange, turquoise, yellow, olive green, teal, orange, purple and lavender set against a black ground. Slutsky manages to achieve a sense of motion from static objects and delight his fans in the process.

Sheila Elias, who has a studio in Miami, Florida, also believes in creating a sense of life highly charged, rather than placid, fixed and inanimate. Her stylized, often

gender-less figures float through the stratosphere, from one realm of being to another. Some seem more in control than others. The acrobatic poses struck by the figures on the screen "Cosmic Web" (2001), a mixed media on lightweight industrial board, include one bending so far over that his/her head amazingly touches the knees. They are people in process, evolving into something better, and embracing change.

Energy, movement, and action enliven these works, even the unpredictable arrangement of two identically sized square boxes in "Untitled III" (1996), a paper collage with acrylic on wood. With paper cutouts of hands appearing to hold up one box and black-and-white enlarged eyeballs peering off the box sides, there is a feeling of containment and also suspicion conveyed by this piece.

In the magnificent "Dream I Had While Awake" (2004), a very large mixed media work on raw unframed canvas, figures stride and hang suspended in mid-air comfortably without fear of falling, a comforting image from the subconscious mind that things will be all right. "March Morn" (1986), a mixed media on canvas of roughly twelve feet by four feet, is a joyful collage of faces, thick paint, paper fish, a fake alligator toy, and even Mickey Mouse. The central figure is a buxom female in a windblown skirt, the commander in chief of all this chaos.

How different is "911 Series #44: Falling Figure II" (2004), ultraviolet cured durst print on vinyl canvas. While many of the works on exhibit are busy, taking the eyes in equally competing directions, this work is minimalist in composition. A figure, neither a man nor a woman, appears to be running while other people are falling and tumbling — a stark portrayal of that terrible, unforgettable September day in New York City when the terrorists attacked the World Trade Center. This central figure is outlined in black, echoing the demarcations put around a deceased crime victim on the ground.

There is another departure, both in palette and mood, in "Freedom" (2005), a mixed media on canvas. It pictures two females and two unidentifiable figures falling in space. Perhaps a metaphor for transformation or coming into their own, the work clearly includes a spider and a star, symbolic of guideposts for the women on their journey through life. Cheerful shades of greens and blues indicate a lightening of sensibility in comparison to "911 Series #44: Falling Figure II." Maybe there is also a sense of hope.

Is there any reason why Elias cannot have her own unique take on the classical genre of the still life? She tackles it in "Three Visions" (1993), a mixed media on canvas of a yellow squash, a brown onion and an eggplant. The vegetables are lusciously oversized and rendered in thick paint. Realism is out the window for the artist, who has been called a concrete Expressionist.

Proving that size is no object for an artist at the peak of her form, Elias takes to the smallest canvas of all in this show in "Rhumba" (2006) from the Odyssey Series. A photo collage and mixed media on canvas, this charming work, no bigger than four inches by five inches, depicts a man on a seaside boardwalk shaded by palm trees. Small yet satisfying, the work is another success for the artist ably represented in this worthy retrospective.