Sculptor shares his subconscious world

By Mary Thomas
Post-Gazette Art Critic

One of the more fascinating aspects of the curious and mesmerizing Sandile sculpture of Brooklyn artist John Baranis is that the motion the viewer perceives is whimsy while the actual movement of his pieces goes all but unnoticed. This is the first observation that comes to mind when considering the darkened Wood Street Galleries, where a pulsing strobe intensifies the surreal and theatrical quality of captivating works that appear to tranmune before one's eyes. Nor should it be. Like all good magi, a certain suspension of criticality is required to fully appreciate.

But after looking at the sculpture for a while, the question "what's going on here?" inevitably arises. The artist accomplishes his sleight of mind in much the same way film-makers do, but his "frames" are three-dimensional. He sculpted a series of slightly altered images that form a sequence and attaches them to a rotating frame. As the 16 or so individual units in a work pass by, they're flashed by the strobe, so that the viewer reads motion in much the way he or she would at the movies. The soap soda from a pair of washing hands morph into paper bags as they fall from the rotating cage and drop into the opening hand of a slotted box, which is the comparison below.

Another dismembered hands serially open an eye chart in front of an anonymous central figure who's sensorially aroused.

The exhibition, "About Time," is a collaboration between the Three Rivers Arts Festival and Wood Street, where a work by Baranisiam was shown early last year.

As intriguing as his technique is, and demanding of precision, the impact of his works — which he calls "transformations" — comes from deeper sources than technology.

For inspiration, Baranisiam says, he probes the "realm of emotion and intuition, and not necessarily calculation and reason. I draw my images from life — not from art history, not from politics — but life as the subconscious.

Baranisiam cites Bell Labs research reporting that consciousness operates at the same speed as language, 15 bits per second, whereas "our senses bring into our bodies information at the rate of 20 million bits per second."

"There's this whole chaos that's developed over consciousness that's like this mile-wide river of information that we stick our finger in every new and then..."

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pretend to be aware of. "A further corollary," he adds, "is that we're in control."

While studying philosophy at the University of Wisconsin, the Chicago native dismayed the "depen- dency state" that seemed the logical conclusion of then-popular existentialism, found hope in Nietzsche's observation that, while mankind in general was small, "artists were in a unique position to create their own world (and) needed no justification to do so." Classes in metalworking followed, but when the emphasis in those classes shifted too heavily toward "prestidigitation" and he perceived as "artificial the effort to restrict all expression to one medium, he turned to sculpture. An aptitude for listening — he says he was a "sub- urban motorhead" when young — allows him to introduce elements of time and narrative into his works, increasing the amount of information presented exponentially.

Baranisiam's ideas are initiated by personal experience and dreams, as with "Forty," a birthday cake that morphs into Medusa and was inspired by his experience of that milestone. But his aims for "universal content," something akin to tapping the Jungian collective consciousness, which may explain why his work is as popular in Asia and Europe as it is in the United States. "I don't really like art that is too personal," he says.

Another corollary he has is that the "psychological schedule art is something that is not to be held on to too much." If the viewer "is clairvoyant about what it is, without a tone, that, to me, is not good art," he says, "I think [the re- sponse] should come from the im- age, not the text, or you might as well just write it down.

Baranisiam's ultimate achievement is to present timeless and complex phenomena of the human person as a way that's both illuminating and amusing to all others.

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