

Tom Patterson, "All That Jazz," Winston-Salem Journal, March 7, 1999

All That Jazz

Jazz was the operative musical metaphor that David Finn had in mind when he began organizing "Making It Up," an exhibition of recent works by four New York artists that's on view at the Wake Forest University Fine Arts Gallery.

Finn, an artist and an assistant professor in the art department at Wake forest, said in a recent interview that he saw an analogy between these artists' methods and jazz musicians' improvisational approach – "making it up" as they go along. The other element that these artists share is their use of "everyday materials."

Ava Gerber makes her work out of chicken wire, artificial flowers and scraps of fabric. **Drew Shiflett's elaborate sculptures are made of cardboard, styrofoam, scrap-metal, tileboard and papier-mache, among other materials.**

In lieu of canvas, Susanna Starr uses industrial sponges as absorbent surfaces for poured acrylic paint, thus creating abstract three-dimensional works that double as paintings and sculptures. And sculptor Jeffrey Gurecka employs rotting fruit and bondo, a puttylike substance used to repair automobile bodies.

Finn said he feels an affinity for these artists because he has used unconventional materials in his own work, including box cardboard, wire and discarded fabric. Finn was living in New York and making life-size humanoid figures out of such materials in the late 1980's, when he first met Gerber at an artists' colony in Omaha, Neb. "Her pieces are very fragile-looking and yet very eloquent in their understatement of the materials. They hover on the edge of being throwaways – something you might not even notice."

Finn said he discovered Shiflett's work four or five years ago during a visit to New York. He said that her intricately constructed sculptures are so time-consuming that she rarely makes more than two of them in a year.

"Her pieces remind me of spiritual pathways and holy cities." He said, "and I found myself subliminally connecting them with some of the outsider art I had seen.

"At first it doesn't appear to be as freely spontaneous as Ava's work, but when you examine the individual small parts of it, it sort of opens up, and you can see that there's a kind of improvisation in the way she uses her materials."

Finn said that when he first encountered Starr's work, she was creating "these big lace doilies out of wood veneer" that are different from her work with sponges. For Starr's more recent work, he said, she sculpts the sponges a bit to make a shape that will hold a reservoir of paint, then pours the paint directly onto them. "When the paint starts spreading out, you start to see an element of chance in the work. Sometimes it makes a big blob around the sponge, and that's really fun. "I don't think there's a lot to read into them in terms of deeper meanings. You have to look at them in terms of processes and surfaces."

Victor Faccinto, the director of the Wake Forest fine Arts Gallery and the exhibit's co-curator, suggested that Gurecka's work also be included in the exhibit. For several years Faccinto had known of Gurecka's work as a member of Dean Street Foo, a few York performance-art group.

During a trip to New York last year to select works by Gerber, Shiflett and Starr for the show, he ran into Gurecka, who invited him to visit his studio in Brooklyn. "There was a strong connection with his art and where he was working," Faccinto said of Gurecka. "The windows of his studio were broken out, and the place looked like it was decaying. There were pieces of Bondo, gauze, rotting fruit and broken furniture lying around."

"He uses these common kinds of materials in a nontraditional way, like making casts of rotting fruit with Bondo. His work is in another arena than the rest of the work in the show, but visually it seemed to fit so well, and when I showed slides of his work to David, he agreed with me."

Faccinto said that Gurecka's work "has a kind of attraction-repulsion element to it." For example, he said that "from a distance, his banana piece (Still-life #7) has a beautiful surface to it."

"The decay takes place inside the bondo, but when you get up close to the piece you can see

traces of rotting bananas oozing through the seams, and you feel like you're looking at something that's dead."

Another of Gurecka's sculptures, *Still-life #10*, consists of a wall-mounted wooden crate of decayed oranges, the holes in which reveal photos of human eyes that seem to peer out at the viewer.

A few days after the exhibit opened, Faccinto saw a few fruit flies hovering around this piece. He said that they reminded him of the maggots and flies that emerged from some of Finn's "trash figures" shown in the Wake Forest Fine Art Gallery about 10 years ago.

"There's something nice about there being something in the work that's alive," Faccinto said.

"The artists in this show all work with a sense of openness to whatever is going to happen with the materials they've chosen." Finn said, "and they leave their work open-ended so that the audience can find whatever they can find in it." "To me this kind of work seems very native in a broad sense. It's very much a part of a mainstream in American art from (Robert) Rauschenberg on. The best things in American art are very free and spontaneous and open."

Tom Patterson