

Martin Johnson, Catherine Fiutko make you think

The work of two very different artists, both Virginia Beach residents, is on display at the Virginia Beach Arts Center. Martin Johnson's succeeds almost despite himself, but Catherine Fiutko's presents more of a problem.

Johnson's work is exciting and interesting. It visually assaults you even before you can study individual pieces. He has arranged his canvasses in the room in a way that bundles them together to form one giant artwork of the whole.

The paintings fill the walls from floor to ceiling, and their bright colors and energetic lines keep your eyes busy from the moment you enter the room. Each individual piece becomes like a chapter in a novel: interesting in its own right, but subjugated to the meaning of the whole.

Most of the individual paintings follow the same format: a vertical picture with a black band, dotted with white, across the top and a title or comment in punning language across the bottom.

Just figuring out what some of the words mean is a little like trying to figure out some of the more obscure vanity plates you can see on the toll road. Some are more simple, like "Never Cease Bewilderment," but what can you make of "Malfem Ainsy"?

There is much to figure out in this show. You can discover, for instance, that one wall is a mirror image of its opposite. You can figure out that the whole is meant to be autobiographical: There are clearly paintings of childhood and others of adolescence and initial sexual experiences.

But most of the references are so obscure that there is no way of figuring them out without interviewing the artist.

In an article in Arts Magazine, Johnson explained that all his work evolves from the word "for," which he sees as a combination of the words "of" and "or." The paintings are generated by the shapes, colors and formal attributes he has assigned to the three letters: "F" is a red square; "O" is a blue circle that symbolizes order; "R" is the yellow triangle of rhythm. But this mishmash of philosophy and synesthesia can mean nothing to us if we merely study the paintings.

Luckily, Johnson's paintings are very good. There is an excitement in their variety. His imagination is fertile and wide-ranging. He uses many styles and an amazing range of subject matter (in an age when

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so many artists seem compelled to make a 300 image "series" of a dried pea or a paper bag).

The unifying element of his work is not the verbal meaning he says it is, but the energy of his style. He always applies his paint vigorously and the result is a vibrant bravado.

Fiutko's work suffers in comparison.

I first took them for satire, and they could stand as biting jibes at religion. The biography that accompanies the show makes it clear that Fiutko is a born-again Christian and sees her work as "spiritual."

Yet how can you take seriously work that portrays over and over the sandy-haired, blue-eyed Jesus of dime store 3-D icons? How can she not be satiric when she paints "The Holy Spirit on a Surfboard"?

Maybe this art will be seen as spiritually meaningful to those who share Fiutko's esoteric beliefs in the Bible and Atlantis, but for the rest of us, it misses the mark.

She achieves some interesting effects by using pieces of mica and gold foil. "It Flashed and Glowed" is a bright abstract painting made from oils, modeling paste, gold foil and chips of mica. It does flash; it does glow. Seen purely as abstraction, it is a success. The gold foil reminds one of the gold backgrounds of Byzantine icons and in that sense, it also might be the most successful in conveying a sense of religion.

Like Johnson, Fiutko relies on wordplay to convey her meaning. But that kind of eccentric "scholarship" does not make up for the lack of visual interest in her paintings.

"Insider/Outsider" will remain on display at the Virginia Beach Arts Center, 1711 Arctic Ave., Virginia Beach, through June 9. Hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday, 1 to 4 p.m. Sunday. Martin Johnson will present a slide lecture on his work at 2 p.m. today in the Arts Center's main gallery. There is no admission charge.

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