

Faculty talents on display at Conkling

A 7 p.m. reception today launches a new exhibit by Minnesota State Mankato's art faculty

By Amanda Dyslin, Mankato Free Press

Photos by John Cross



Faculty in the Minnesota State University department of art hung fellow faculty members' work last week in the newly renovated Conkling Gallery.

The "Black Hole" dominates in the center of the space, immediately drawing the eyes of those who step inside the Conkling Gallery.

Standing roughly 6 feet high and 8 feet long, the geometric piece made of sugar pine and aluminum appears scientific and precise. Each plank comes together purposefully, at carefully planned angles, held tight by stainless steel screws.

Five feet away, a sheet of paper is hung loosely against the wall, wrinkled and curved by the barrage of materials scribbled and splattered onto its surface. Charcoal, coffee, varnish, red ink, salt and urine all have gone into creating "Bobblehead," a political statement about the war in Iraq.

These two pieces — co-existing in the newly renovated gallery at Minnesota State University — could be considered quite symbolic of the changes in the department of art during the past five years or so.

The pieces, seemingly opposite in style and technique, were created by faculty members James Johnson and Brian Frink, respectively, who have diverse points of view when it comes to creating art. And, recently, this contrast has become representative of the department, overall.



Mika Laidlaw has sculpture pieces on display, including "Rest" at front. James Johnson's "Black Hole" sits at the center of the exhibit.

During the past few years, nine new professors have joined the 15-member faculty, having taken over for those who have retired or moved on. With the change have come new ideas and fresh perspectives on art and teaching, Frink said.

"We all have distinctive styles," Frink said. "There can be very diverse points of view. But we really are talking about the same thing, which is the human condition."

The department used to host a faculty exhibition every two years to give students an opportunity to see firsthand their professors can and do practice what they preach. But as faculty members began to retire and the department conducted searches for replacements, the faculty shows ended.

"Everything was up in the air," Frink said. "It's been a real transformation for us as a faculty." Things finally have begun to settle. The new faculty is in place, and the Conkling Gallery has been upgraded.

The carpeted walls have been stripped, and stark white walls now hold the two-dimensional art. The floor is bare concrete and sculpture pieces sit atop white display boxes. To help christen the space and celebrate the changes in the department, the biennial faculty exhibits have been reinstated, the first of which opens today and runs through Oct. 24. As people walk through the space, the contrasting pieces

will make clear the fresh range of expertise in the department, which includes 12 adjunct professors, said Johnson, the department chairman.



Various genres of art will be on display at the faculty exhibit, from sculpture to photography.

"It's good to expose students to our work," Johnson said. "It creates a sense that the department is made up of practicing artists."

Liz Miller, for example, teaches drawing and mostly works in installations. Whereas a painter is limited to the confines of a canvas, Miller addresses the architecture of the room and creates pieces that are a part of the space.

"It's an entirely different aesthetic in the department," Frink said.

Johnson's aesthetic also is unique to the faculty. An interest in physics and astronomy inspires Johnson to begin his work architecturally, sketching mechanical drawings of his sculptures that include precise measurements.

"Black Hole," the only unfinished piece in the exhibit, is about illusion. A hole in the center of the piece, lined by metal beams, is intended to be viewed by people from both ends. The depth of the piece is supposed to appear longer by looking in one end, then the other.

Johnson may still cover the outside of the piece, and he'll polish the beams to a mirror finish to add to the effect. But the basic structure is complete.

Recently, when Johnson and a couple of students constructed the piece in the gallery, it was the first time Johnson saw "Black Hole" put together. Before he only experienced it in segments and in his mind's eye.

"It was pretty exciting," Johnson said.

"We're all really excited about what we do," Frink said.

In celebration of their newly renovated facilities, Minnesota State University, Mankato's art department faculty will be exhibiting their work in the Conkling Gallery. The faculty art show opens at 7 p.m. Monday, Oct. 2 with reception in Nelson Hall 139.

The exhibition includes pieces from all the different areas of studio art including ceramics, drawing, fibers, graphic design, painting, photography, printmaking and sculpture. The public is encouraged to attend the free event.

Faculty artists include Harlan Bloomer, Alisa Eimen, Brian Frink, Curt Germundson, James B. Johnson, Mika Laidlaw, Keith Luebke, Liz Miller, Rea Mingeva, David Morano, Todd Shanafelt, Melissa Stone, Erik Waterkotte, Gina Wenger, and Matt Willemsen.

Adjunct faculty artists include Doug Becken, Cheryl Casteen, David Hamlow, Leah Hughes, Michelle Johnson, Les Laidlaw, Lu Mulder, Charles Putnam, Ann Widness and Brad Widness.

For gallery hours, please call the Art Department at 507-389-6412.