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Local artists spell it out at the Nerman Museum

By ALICE THORSON

The Kansas City Star

On the eve of its second anniversary, the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art delivers on one of its most important promises with the new exhibit "Word," featuring works by three mid-career Kansas City artists. Director Bruce Hartman has been a big supporter of Kansas City art, and for the last 15 years he has been steadily building what he intends to be a collection of record of art activity in the area.

And from the first, his vision for the Nerman Museum included a gallery dedicated to Kansas City art. It has turned out to be a good call, as artists here are turning out dynamic and topical work that is the equal of anything being made in other large cities.

The idea of artists using language in their works is not a new one, but "Word" endows the practice with a sense of urgency. New works by Christopher Leitch, Archie Scott Gobber and Jim Sajovic crackle with the tensions of a divided country in the midst of social and economic turmoil.

"I think you really do feel the spirit of the times," Hartman said. "There's this ominous, disquieting aspect to all of it."

Gobber's piece, "Do Not Love," lettered in the style of Robert Indiana's 1960s icon, reflects the present era's repudiation of that decade's come-together impulses. A large wall drawing by Christopher Leitch encodes the phrase "You are what you hate." Two of Sajovic's new portrait-based paintings are overlaid with a chilling statement that begins: "I may kill."

All of the artists in "Word" have had a good deal of local exposure. To keep things fresh, Hartman chose works that illuminate new or lesser-known aspects of their production or, in the case of Leitch's wall drawing, respond to new challenges.

Gobber has a room of his own, hung with small-scale works on paper that pack a punch equal to that of his larger, better-known paintings.

Sajovic's new digital paintings, shown here for the first time, may be the best work of his career.

Although he has used texts and digital technology before, these works, based on poems by a former Kansas City Art Institute faculty member, Harvey Hix, have an emotional resonance and social relevance that render them unforgettable.

All are portraits of sorts, based on photographs that Sajovic manipulates on the computer, prints onto canvas and coats with dozens of layers of iridescent acrylic glaze. Sometimes he adds hand painting to the works.

The "I may kill" threat continues: "you should know this about me a razor in the night without warning," and it appears as if written in the steam of a bathroom mirror. The words are superimposed on the portrait of a woman, whose resolute expression suggests she has had enough.



The exhibit features a series of haunting new paintings by Jim Sajovic based on the poems of Harvey Hix, including this 2008 piece, "I may kill...(F)."

The same text, written in small red capital letters, overlays a separate portrait of a man, whose liquid blue eyes seem to issue a plea, perhaps to save him from himself.

Three other portraits contribute to the ensemble's potent mix of desire, disappointment, troubled conscience, bad faith and feelings of powerlessness.

The image of a faceless man wearing a derby bears the words: "We regret to inform you that what we have to say is something you will not want to hear."

The words ring hollow and insincere, as if mouthed by a customer service representative or a medical professional, conveying news that is routine for them but of great importance to the individual recipient.

In a neighboring portrait, "You didn't listen," the bad behavior described in the text is blamed on both the victim and the human nature of the perpetrators.

Taken together, the works offer a haunting portrait of a society in moral breakdown, in which individual urges and grievances leave little room for fellow feeling or commitment to the common good.

Words can wound, deceive and obscure and are woefully inadequate to convey the complexity of human feelings and ideas. These are just some of issues taken up by Leitch's drawings of words, rooted, he says, in grade school writing exercises that involved copying placards of cursive letters.

As a child he was also attracted to the individual peculiarities of his parents' handwriting, especially his mother's, which did not conform at all to the rules he learned in school.

As an artist Leitch has made a point of upending these old rules and inventing new ones, and the gnarly, illegible scrawls he displays in "Word" show the results. In a group of nine small drawings of single words, such as "now," "view," "present," "memory," Leitch formed some words with his right hand, others with his left. He wrote backward and forward and sometimes closed his eyes.

His non-logical and non-linear approach is deliberate, arising out of his equation of "illegibility with ineffability." Visually, what the viewer ends up contending with are abstractions of crabby, meandering and interpenetrating lines, touched with small areas of color.

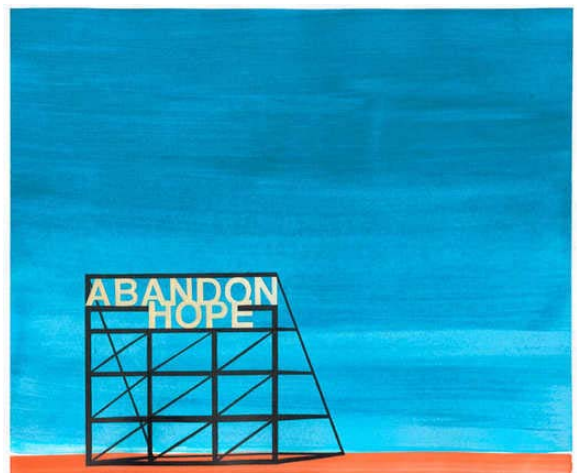
Leitch's large loopy wall drawing, "You Are What You Hate," arcs and tumbles across the wall with refreshing insouciance, staking minimal claim to the space provided. As in the small works, he manipulates his selected words to the point of un-readability, in this case, hiding what amounts to a hidden truth.

Where Sajovic's sources are literary and Leitch's are philosophical, **Gobber** delves into the vernacular, borrowing from the conventions of signs.

Two sketches of billboards — one proclaiming "Abandon Hope," the other confessing "I Yearn for a Happy Ending" — bookend a barrage of hopeful and despairing messages.

Letters spelling out "Dream" in red and black capital letters hover in the beams of criss-crossing spotlights. Another boasts "I Paid My Mortgage" in shimmering gold letters. Both speak to equally difficult challenges in these tough economic times, perhaps most aptly invoked by another work, which features the single word "Tired."

Gobber is a master of the double entendre, as exemplified by a drawing of the letters "P" and "U," which is titled "Up" but also suggests an expression of disgust.



The title, "Never Abandon Hope," (2009) says one thing, but the piece conveys a different sentiment in this artwork by **Archie Scott Gobber** in the "Word" exhibition.

In "Palin'," he continues his sly engagement with politics — here the apostrophe at the end turns the name into an expression of so much wishful thinking on the part of the former candidate's detractors.

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Hartman has paired the "Word" show with "Light/Text," a small, word-based exhibit by nationally prominent artist Hank Willis Thomas.

The exhibit in the museum's new media gallery features three neon wall works, each featuring a series of words that flash on and off in sequences that yield different meanings and sentiments.

The stacked words "This Is/My Best/Sell Your/Hard Time" yield a dizzying array of statements, including "Sell hard," "This is my best time," "This is hard."

It's as if multiple speakers are commenting on the same topic from the diverging perspectives of say, an employer rallying a sales force, a Wall Street tycoon and a person who has lost his job and health insurance.

Willis is known for works addressing issues of race. Coinciding with a heated national debate on the topic, one piece features varying combinations of the words "off," "pitch," "white," "black" and the suffix "ness," yielding such combinations as "off whiteness" and "pitch blackness." Again, the individual's circumstances determine the values he or she attaches to these terms, highlighting the difficulties of reaching consensus on such a charged topic.

All of these neon works — a third piece flashes existential snippets from the phrase, "It's everywhere you want to be the life you were meant to live" — turn on the push-pull between hard reality and dreams and desires, and the way these are colored by social, racial and economic factors.

For all the recent talk of hope, these have not turned out to be uplifting times. Leitch, Gobber, Sajovic and Thomas look to the roots of the problem, focusing our attention on what's in the way.

ON EXHIBIT

•**The shows:** "Word: Archie Scott Gobber, Christopher Leitch, Jim Sajovic" and "Light/Text: Hank Willis Thomas"

•**Where:** Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Johnson County Community College, Overland Park

•**When:** 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday and Saturday; 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Friday; noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. Closed Monday. The exhibit continues through Nov. 20.

•**How much:** Free.

•**Information:** 913-469-3000 or www.nermanmuseum.org.

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Christopher Leitch's word drawings are illegible by design. The titles, including "overlapping 'reasons', one left, one right, eyes closed, random orientations, random color" (2007) incorporate clues of how they were made.