

'An Average Joe'

Broghammer's 'diary' reveals quite to the contrary at Moving Gallery

By Michael Joe Krainak
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Artist Joseph Broghammer keeps a diary, but it's not private and it's not ordinary. Neither of which will surprise anyone familiar with him or his art.

"My work is based on stuff that happens in my life," Broghammer says, "some sad, some bad, some stupid. Whatever I think I need to talk about to myself, I will draw it. Even if a work is about someone else, it ultimately is about me and how I see myself in their shoes. It's like keeping a daily diary of visual objects of my life."

Broghammer opened his "diary" last week at the Moving Gallery, this time in the lower level of the Old Market Passageway at 1034 Howard Street, and his latest entries can be "read" Tuesday-Thursday, from 11-2 p.m. and 5-7 p.m. and Friday-Saturday, 11-2 p.m. and 5-8 p.m. until December 2.

What you will see in this untitled show are a dozen or so wonderfully bizarre mixed media that virtually defy description or interpretation. Not that they confound the artist much. When he 'reads' his diary Broghammer says it reveals a rather ordinary fellow. "The one thing I can say I discovered about myself is that I am a boring, average guy. I watch movies about artists or see work of other artists and I think 'I wish my life was as interesting'."

Okay, Basquiat he's not. But, this is an artist talking and his art speaks volumes about a world created and occupied by a very fertile imagination. Broghammer begins with a piece of paper carefully placed on a wall and from there "I look at it and let the paper tell me where to go. Sometimes, it's about one idea or a bunch of ideas from a few weeks of my life...it's done when I get bored with myself or I feel I have said enough about what I wanted to say."

The result, with titles like "The Family March" or "Well-Protected Heart" is usually a central figure surrounded by a stream of conscious and unconscious images that comes alive on paper in a colorful and atmospheric narrative. Each piece is fixed within a three-dimensional, elaborate frame that both extends subject matter while making its psychological impact seem even more deep-seated.

Jeremy Stern, assistant director of the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, believes Broghammer's work has "an incredibly personal, heartfelt approach that draws you in on the intensity of the imagery without making the viewer feel like a voyeur...but he has a drawing technique that I find fascinating to look at. Joe's work is all about the details and touch. Pastels are an easy medium to abuse - you generally see a lot of bright, happy flowers or landscapes, not so much the eerie, personal and narrative stage moments."

Stern also hinted at a "surreal or allegorical" quality in Broghammer's preternatural narratives, something he knows about after witnessing his own fine show, "Beasts United" at Fused Studios this fall. But, Broghammer balks at the former saying, "I love surrealism, but I do not see my work as surreal. They are not fantasies I want or imagine...because they may be arranged to look unreal, they have the surreal feel to the audience, but the work is all based off my life."

Allegory, however, is another matter as the artist admits "I start with ideas, turn the ideas into iconographic objects and then set those objects into my own world." It's a world that Broghammer acknowledges he lets a viewer in almost reluctantly and only up to a point. Once he has set his spell, this conjurer will turn trickster and not only limit clues to interpretation but add a few red flags as well.

"I never give the 'key' to open the work to understanding them 100%," he said. "My brother or friends think they get it sometimes so I make sure that I add some tricks just to mess with them. Other than once in Michigan, some crazy lady figured a work out, no one else has ever 'got it.' I

intend it that way. You may understand parts of a work, but never the whole puzzle. I don't think it would be that interesting for everyone to 'read' it."

Maybe so, but one can't resist the challenge when confronting his work in the Moving Gallery show. Consider for example what may be his two signature pieces, the previously mentioned "Well-Protected Heart" and "The Family March," one an open book, the other a fleeting side show, each representing a different side of the artist's personality. In the former, on a large canvas, a large heart, barely bleeding, barely pumping, has barricaded itself from a world of hurt. Beautifully rendered in layers of purples and reds, it looks ravaged and badly in need of salvage. Wearing its emotions on its sleeves, this is the heart of the artist, maybe any artist, proud of its scars, personal and professional.

More elusive and distanced is the animated "Family March," a parade, left to right, of circus performers that unfolds within an exquisite, carny frame. The POV here is one of a detached observer and one can't help noticing that none of the performers, seals, elephants, dogs and horses, trained and dancing, look all that happy or inspired. This doesn't seem personal. Perhaps, instead, it's a long line of artists or, more recently, politicians parading for their 15 minutes of fame or significance before exiting stage right.

Broghammer continues this dichotomy of personal and private offerings which might be an appropriate title or at least subtext for the entire show. Consider the following. In "First Steps," an infant sprouting new growth from its head breaks free of its pot leaving its roots and old growth in a pile behind. As a sign of its promise, the artist frames the scene with a beautiful bed of roses in full bloom. Whatever the first steps of this infant, our well-tended "rosebud" looks both eager and tentative on his own.

"Hey Look Mom—Here is My Heart" sounds personal but is underdone by its scientific presentation. The central image is a prone, full figure oddly outlined in chalk. Diagrammed almost like a side of beef, this anatomical study features at top the two central organs, the heart and the brain. Sporting a matte of epoxy-like entrails this apparent autopsy of the artist is a labor of love.

Probably the most satirical piece in the show is the highly allegorical "Grandma's Prediction" whose shadow box frame fairly screams "Your Lucky Fortune" as it invites one inside. Whatever grandma is prognosticating, it doesn't seem too optimistic as the central figure, a bobble-headed young adult is missing several pieces of his own anatomy. However he has gambled, won and lost, he has paid for it with a pound or two of flesh...as grandma predicted.

And then there is Chucky or better yet, "Chuckles" as Broghammer calls it, as indeed this little devil does evoke images of the movies' most terrible infant. A favorite at the elbow-to-elbow opening, baby "Chuckles" sports red-rimmed eyes, tattoos and casts a menacing shadow of horns, tail and pitchfork. His playroom looks innocent enough but the real clue as to his sense of humor is the serpent encased in the hellish frame that seems to grow before one's very eyes.

As Broghammer has grown from emerging to established artist, with group and solo shows throughout the Midwest and work in museums, private and public collections, gratefully, he still identifies with "Chuckles," that fine edge between innocence and experience.

"I have been seeking to better understand myself by playing with my art and ideas not unlike how a small child plays with his toys." Though he still claims to be "just an average guy," his diary reveals an artist ever the contrarian.