

'A Flock of Joe'

Broghammer 'cairns' at Moving Gallery reveal more refined side to this Omaha original

**By Michael Joe Krainak
Omaha City Weekly**

In January Norman Geske, the director emeritus of the Sheldon Museum of Art, went back to the drawing board and organized a truly fascinating exhibit at the Lincoln gallery, Modern Arts Midwest, called simply "Drawing." Yet, there was nothing simple about the results which featured a variety of artists and their take on the medium which surprised even Geske.

"I started out with an idea of what drawing is," he said then, "but it struck me that while many artists adhered to the traditional aspects of drawing, others were more reluctant to limit themselves to the pure element of line. Many have a more generous sense of it."

One of these more generous types was Joe Broghammer whose oil pastel, "Well Protected Heart," transformed mere mark making into expansive and expressive imagery. Geske, a purist when it comes to drawing referred to the piece as a "dry painting," which accurately describes the work in general of one of the region's most gifted contemporary artists. Broghammer's mixed media drawings of pastels, pencil, charcoal and spray fixative reveal a vision that is complex and often controversial but always personal.

Broghammer is an edgy artist, a term often ascribed to a few who polite society likes to push away or compartmentalize because it prefers the status quo or the politically correct. If he isn't a household name yet, his new solo show presented by the Moving Gallery which opens tonight, Thursday, May 8, from 7–9 P.M. at its Garden of the Zodiac space at 1034 Howard St. should begin to change that. This is Broghammer's second solo with the Moving Gallery as its director Vera Mercer, continues to see something special in his work which this time around adds a unique refinement to his more familiar surreal tableaux.

"These drawings are so different, yes? Mercer said. "The crazy, colorful fantasy is still there, but this is a development with a more refined focus in a classical painting style. Yet, they are so bold. He is such an original, not the style of the moment."

Broghammer's new work for this exhibit includes nine, "46 X 47" mixed media pieces that, as indicated, represent a departure from his wonderfully bizarre work which included bleeding hearts and babies. Gone too are the elaborate scenarios with a carnival and circus setting and atmosphere. The narrative is there, but the focus is more direct while being subtle. This time around the imagery, primarily centered on birds, is less aggressive, more inviting, but challenging nonetheless.

These are no ordinary birds. These are the stuff that dreams are made of, or more accurately, day dreams, musings and nightmares based on the artist's "life experiences." In his artist statement Broghammer describes his birds as cairns which are artificial piles of stones often erected as landmarks.

"Each of the birds in this series represents an important moment in my life I want to remember," he says. "I chose birds because they are familiar to us all. My goal was to choose (them) with the qualities and color of the feeling I was experiencing." When it was pointed out that this new series and show lacked a title, he laughingly said, completely in character, "Why not call it 'A Flock of Joe?'"

Don't let his self-effacing tone unfairly influence your appreciation of his work though. Broghammer is justifiably proud of his technique when he says it is "my intention to push the medium of pastel and pencil to the point that it takes on an expressive painterly quality." You can witness this yourself as you will never see signs of media residue on the bottom frame typical of

pastel and charcoal. Besides being an excellent draftsman, his tight control of his mixed media lends a depth and contour to both figure and setting that is difficult to achieve by traditional drawing.

The artist also exhibits a masterful control of lighting, proportion and composition that serves his imagination and vision well. Broghammer's flock might make a patron of the Audubon Society blanche, and you won't find them in the "Art of Bird Illustrations" canon but you can't deny their pictorial beauty and his attention to species detail and palette. His pigeons, cardinals and parrots, among others, are bathed in chiaroscuro lighting that gives each a film noir effect befitting theme and mood.

Each "cairn" sits stuffed on a precarious perch both honored and vulnerable not unlike the artist himself, alter egos that reveal all without telling anything. These "still lifes" sing only metaphorically via their iconography which is a vital part of their setting, dress or very own nature. There is a personal story behind each, but Broghammer is reluctant to share, figuratively couching them in symbols that are at times deliberately misleading. Broghammer is an illusionist and a provocateur, a charlatan even. Though the mystery and humor in this series isn't as dark as before, it's no less intriguing.

As puzzling as "Joe's Flock" may be, their meaning can be appreciated if not completely deciphered by examining the clues, the icons, according to category. Broghammer favors graphic symbols, utensils of all kinds, toys, clothing and additional animal and natural imagery which contribute to a finished image. Factor in his choice of species, pose and expression and gradually his aviary begins to reveal its secrets usually autobiographical and at times subconsciously.

For example, consider the ironically titled "Great Quadragenarian," a 40-year-old mallard welded to a set of wheels wearing a merry-go-round headdress from which dangles another flock of birds in miniature. The bird looks proud and defiant but a little worse for wear with its patches and tires somewhat deflated. Another similarly encumbered bird is his "Searching for Gold," a beautifully illustrated parrot impaled on his simple perch. Unlike the former, this is more minimal in its portrait of a normally mimicking and mocking bird skewered by the promise of a small pot of gold that dangles just out of reach and weighed down by a green block of envy and promises hanging from its neck.

Then there are the more obscure "Pigeon Daisy" and "I Smell a Rat." Like the others, each is gracefully rendered even as they wear their troubling visage. Whatever their source or inspiration they are both self-deprecating and over-exposed. In the former a red-breasted, blue-crested pigeon with the tail of a dog and collar to match squats on a pedestal resembling a crutch. The setting is strewn with toys and other signs of innocence tossed aside, and this pigeon is sporting a wreath of canine teeth which seems to suggest that our artist feels he isn't getting any younger.

Or any more trusting as "I Smell a Rat" seems to suggest. This piece features a stately white owl emblazoned with a red Swiss Army cross and a Medieval shield tucked under its wing. Like the knife of the same name our wise, somewhat ruffled figure is prepared for anything with its array of files, scissors and other accessories springing from its being. The title however is duplicitous as this bird is predatory too as its other wing reveals a pair of playing cards totaling 21.

Perhaps Broghammer's most accomplished and beguiling piece is his "Candy Cardinal," a richly detailed bird too attached to its sweets and treats, which hang from its person, and the spoon that feeds it. Normally one of our most colorful and beloved of birds, this cardinal is risking addiction and gluttony as it sits on its candy cane leg. "Be careful what you eat or what eats you" the artist may be saying, which in this case may be fame and fortune.

Broghammer considers himself to be just an "average Joe," but there is nothing average about this work. And, like all artists who deserve recognition, they risk public opinion. "A Flock of Joe," his own mirror imagery, proves he can handle both without reservation but with mixed emotions. If you doubt this check out the wavering line that separates the strong beak of his cardinal. In a year of what

is becoming a richly rewarding in the visual arts in this region, this solo show, an Omaha original, deserves to go on the road.