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Bumbershoot picks: Elvis art, glass art, neon art and more art

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Bumbershoot

The visual-arts component of Bumbershoot has gained some prime real estate this year.

Along with the Seattle Center Pavilion (where an Elvis Presley art tribute occupies the whole building), it's laid claim to the roomy Fisher Pavilion, filling it with art that ranges from video to sculpture to glasswork to Dylan Neuwirth's gigantic neon installation, "NOW."

There's plenty of kid-friendly whimsical fare on hand in "The Past, The Present and The Future," which draws on the "Jetsonian" flavor of the 1962 World's Fair for some of its inspiration. But the biggest revelation in this year's lineup is "Christopher Martin Hoff Remembered."

It's also the saddest — Hoff, a dedicated outdoor painter who for a dozen years chronicled the urban side of Seattle, died in March at the age of 36.

His Bumbershoot show was never intended as a career retrospective. Instead, festival curator Chris Weber contacted him in the early planning stages for the 2012 visual-arts show. Weber's idea was that Hoff would create paintings of Seattle Center that would document the "present" in the 2012 festival's past-present-future theme.

That didn't come to pass. What we have instead is roughly 60 of his paintings — mostly oils on canvas, with a few watercolors — on loan from collectors across the country. Hoff's work is photorealistic with eerie touches (his city streets are always unpopulated). In reproduction, they resemble photographs, but in the "flesh" you can see subtle experiments in color and texture going on.

Another beguiling element: Images are often split into multi-canvas diptychs or triptychs, breaking the "realistic" flow of the imagery in ways that make you study it all the more closely. Docklands, billboards, broadcast towers, construction sites, Dumpster-lined alleys, highway overpasses, shining rain-smear streets — all, taken together, have an impressive cumulative power.

For this exhibit, curator Beth Sellars has included photographs of Hoff himself, accompanied by written remembrances by his friends, many of them fellow artists. His working tools — backpack, easel, paints, brushes, folding stool, T-square, huge umbrella — are also on display, making vivid all the gear he lugged with him. With this poignant touch, he feels powerfully present, even in his absence.

In other arts offerings:

"This Is Glass," curated by Sarah Traver and Grace Meils, emphasizes how unglasslike glass art can be. Example: Matthew Szösz's "Elizabethan Study No. 1," resembling a huge, lacy Elizabethan collar (Szösz's spirograph-like lacemaking machine with which he made it is on display alongside it). A solar-powered model of celestial bodies in motion by Mark Zipel is also in the works.

"Elvistravaganza!" includes both classic Elvisiana (Alfred Wertheimer's famous tongue-tip-to-tongue-tip 1956 photograph, "The Kiss") and some startling new Elvis images (Ron English's three-eyed "ElvisElvis Green Orange Gold," using silk-screen ink on synthetic polymer paint on canvas). A replica of Elvis's Jungle Room at Graceland and an Elvis Meditation Garden (featuring a guitar-playing topiary Elvis) have also been lovingly created by curators Marlow Harris and JoDavid.

Nearby, "SAM Record Store," a vinyl LP exhibit assembled by Seattle Art Museum's Sandra Jackson-Dumont and Olson Kundig Architects, will be the site of "curator-led listening parties."

If "Elvistravaganza!" and "Record Store" look back to the vinyl era, "Skyward!" is in the grip — sometimes happily, sometimes ominously — of the future. Curators Shelly Leavens and Jana Brevick mix new-media work with what Brevick warmly describes as "good old regular sculpture."

Among the most curious offerings are "Farm Factory Skypad" by Cathy McClure, which transforms mechanical stuffed toys into animated bronze or sterling-silver automatons, and "Submit to Cloud" by Garrett Kelly and Amber Kai Morgan, an interactive gizmo that will have you questioning the faith we put in the Internet.

Not yet installed when I stopped by were Brevick and Hahn Rossman's "cloud-climbing gloves" designed, Brevick says, "so you can scale the heavens."

I have no idea what they look like or how they work, but I definitely plan on finding out.

Note: "The Past, The Present and The Future" is open free to the public, 1 p.m.-9 p.m. Friday.

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