

## A world of their own

*Two artists have their way with reality*

*Jennifer A. Smith on Friday 08/10/2007, (6) Recommendations*

While the two new solo exhibitions at the James Watrous Gallery make use of everyday objects and settings as their starting points, they wind up someplace quite different. In photographer Jessica Jacobs' "Inside Out" and painter Robert Atwell's "Today and Tomorrow," viewers encounter artists who have developed their own visual worlds.

Jacobs, who resides in Madison, is particularly intriguing. In her large-format color photographs, she crafts mysterious narratives that incorporate her highly assured way of handling color and composition. Jacobs plays tone on tone or mixes in a bright pop of color or interesting textures. While some artists' work looks weaker the more you see of it, Jacobs' looks stronger; you get a better sense of what she's trying to achieve and how well she does it.

In "Treasure," eggs are nestled in a small depression in the snow — an image just "off" enough to exert a strange pull. While you can wonder about the story implied by Jacobs' tableau — how did the eggs get here? — you're also drawn in by the layering of white on white, the translucence of both the eggshells and the snow, and the geometry of both eggs and ice crystals. Both subject matter and formal qualities hold the viewer's interest.

In "Parallel," we're confronted with a forest of barren trees and a hot pink plastic ball in the foreground. Upon further inspection, there's something pink in the background — a child's parka caught in the trees, perhaps? Again, the scene presented to us is ambiguous, inviting us to weave our own story from it.

Robert Atwell paints in enamel on aluminum panels, giving his paintings the shiny, almost wet look of a new convertible. The Menomonie artist begins with drawings that he then manipulates on a computer. The resulting paintings, rendered in brilliant blues, pinks, lime green and oranges, are abstracted and exuberant. Atwell may draw his source material from the stuff of everyday life — he cites the Midwestern landscape and pop culture — but the result is like a cartoonish alternate universe. While his work doesn't possess the narrative or visual depth of Jacobs', it's got an appealing energy.

Atwell names his paintings with titles that pinpoint them in precise moments in time (such as "Thu, Jun 23, 2005, 11:24 pm"), but those titles really don't help us decipher the works. Forms have been so abstracted that it's a guessing game to figure out what they were originally — not necessarily a criticism. Atwell's paintings present a funhouse world of his own making that, like Jacobs' enigmatic tableaux, is worth dipping into.



'Thu, June 23, 2005 11:24pm'

Credit: Jessica Jacobs

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