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## Poignant narratives

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Winners of the McKnight Foundation's 2007/08 grants to artists are an unusually successful bunch. Their paintings, sculpture and drawings, displayed through Aug. 10 in a handsome show at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, have a lot in common. Sensitive, skillfully executed and sometimes brooding, their narrative images touch on poignant and sometimes troubling social and cultural issues -- from abortion to displacement by natural disasters, from family history to cultural patrimony.

Chosen from about 175 applicants, the four winners of the annual awards were picked independently, as always, but their shared sensibility brings a nice coherence to the show. Each received \$25,000 from the foundation. The exhibit's quality argues that the money was a smart investment in talent.

### Stacey Davidson

Were Davidson an actress rather than a painter, she might be Meryl Streep, so distinctive is her look and so large her talent for subtle expressions and mood-altering gestures. Like Streep, Davidson is a master manipulator of quicksilver effects. Her subjects are tenderly awkward dolls that she has fashioned from wire, putty and scraps of cloth. She portrays them standing, as if on stage, in front of nearly neutral backgrounds somewhat reminiscent of the early paintings of Nicholas Africano. With rare exception they are alone, absorbed in thought. Most are female and youngish, though a few are scruffy men, a couple are hags and at least one, "Lydia," is frumpy and middle-aged.

Through these odd dramatis personae Davidson offers, in 14 paintings, a vision of contemporary life as an empty tableau inhabited by individuals whose existential isolation brings to mind Woody Allen's bleak aphorism, "We're all in this alone." Certain set-ups offer narrative clues to their sorrows, as when a youngish doll sees her aged self reflected in a mirror, or a lovely, sad-faced teen wears a T-shirt that says, "I had an abortion."

Dolls have an ancient lineage and a universal cultural presence in everything from corn-cob toys to shamanistic totems, surrealistic fetishes and ultra-chic Barbies. Davidson's sensitive portraits add a substantial and revealing new chapter to their history.

### Megan Vossler

In small, eloquent drawings on large sheets of paper, and two dozen plaster sculptures, Vossler continues her haunting investigation of refugees displaced by unspecified forces -- war, natural disaster, political upheaval. Inspired by news photos and the U.S. Army website, her drawings are minimal in their detail, the landscapes spare (anonymous

mountains, generic ravines) and the figures shadowy and stripped of any facial features or clothing styles that might tie them to a place or time. Their plight is, she suggests, universal and eternal.

Piled at the center of the gallery, her sculptures consist of plaster casts of the insides of backpacks, plastic bundles and other travel gear that the displaced might carry. The sculptures closely echo work of British artist Rachel Whiteread, who has famously cast the spaces beneath chairs and inside whole buildings.

#### Amy DiGennaro

By contrast with the generic imagery of Davidson and Vossler, DiGennaro's large black-and-white drawings are intensely autobiographical and personal. Adapting a format inspired by medieval devotional books, she illustrates scenes from her family's life framed by wide borders filled with little scenes recording incidents from childhood.

In one, her Canadian-born partner (wearing Mountie jodhpurs) carefully tends their two children (depicted as birds); in another, flora and fauna swirl around her pregnant self while a third depicts her late father partially costumed as Punchinello, an 18th-century Italian jester. Religious and natural imagery, family tales, favorite foods, house-shaped heads and distorted body parts make for a rich tapestry of incidents. Fascinating.

#### Andrea Carlson

In recent shows, Carlson has fused designs and concepts derived from American Indian legends with images from European culture. She continues that approach here in two, dramatic 16-panel paintings that are each about 8 feet tall and 10 feet wide. Their wide borders consist of black-and-white geometric designs reminiscent of traditional woven-basket or rug patterns. Strips of the designs wrap, like the iris of an eye or camera, around a central opening through which can be seen imaginary landscapes of water, sky and rocks. The paintings are remarkable for their visual bravura and the precision of Carlson's execution.

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