

WHITE FLAG PROJECTS

Kessmann finds art in crumpled plastic bags

By David Bonetti, POST-DISPATCH VISUAL ARTS CRITIC

When you first take a look at Dean Kessmann's new work, it is a little dispiriting. Eighteen identically shaped sheets of paper, all 24-by-34 inches, line the walls, one relentlessly after another. At closer vantage, each image centered on the sheet appears to be a variation on a theme.



Dean Kessmann, "Walmart," 2005

But all is still not what it seems. I initially read the works as paintings, abstract expressionist washes of color, clogged together in a central implosion of color and form. Wrong again.

These are photographs of crumpled up plastic shopping bags digitally scanned and printed. Individually, they are handsome, and they fulfill the formalist rules about how an abstract painting should work.

But they are not abstract paintings, remember; they are photographs of plastic bags, and the color present is the result of mused up advertising graphics.

Most are indecipherable, but the red concentric circles of Target give away the game. Of course, a look at the checklist identifies every bag: Blockbuster, Staples, Safeway, Borders, Best Buy, Wal-Mart, True Value — the emporia defining our existence.

Kessmann, a former St. Louisan now living in Washington, is adding another chapter here to a rich book of work that follows the rules of abstract painting — flatness, all-over composition, attention to edge — while incorporating images from popular culture.

I'd say that the advertising is too hidden. I'd like the source material to be more evident. But there is always an argument to be made for subtlety.

Upstairs, in the Library, Brandon Anschutz is showing five wood sculptures that promise an interesting new direction for the local painter. Translating his familiar midcenturyish neo-geo abstractions into three-dimensional form creates a whole new ballgame.

A fine woodworker, Anschutz has created strange free-standing and table-top works that relate to both surrealism and old-fashioned children's toys. Fortunately, he has not given up his sassy sense of color, and the juxtaposition of acid green spheres and shocking pink cylinders to sensuously shaped blocks of luxurious hard wood is provocative and fun, as always a winning combination.