

Four young artists exhibit work at GRAM

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Whether you like your art straightforward and realistic, murky and multimedia, or somewhere in between, "4 Under 40: Contemporary Michigan Artists" has something for you.

The exhibition, which hangs in the Grand Rapids Art Museum for two more weeks, showcases the work of four very different artists – Lowell painter Adam Tetzlaff, Coloma photographer Thomas Allen, Grand Rapids printmaker/installation artist Adam Wolpa and Holland painter Meredith Ridl.

Adam Tetzlaff

This talented photo-realist painter offers acrylic paintings and black-and-white ink drawings. The remarkable detail of his paintings, in particular, will have you wondering if he isn't putting you on and simply painting over photographs.

However, Tetzlaff's paintings, which are mostly horizontal scenes of people in outdoor landscapes, have a rich, textured, three-dimensional quality absent in pictures produced by cameras. The scenarios he portrays seem alive here and now, rather than frozen in a Kodak moment.

In his ink drawings, Tetzlaff appropriates images from 16th century Italian paintings and plunks icons from other centuries into their midst.

In "Unexpected Spectrum of Spectators," three figures look to the sky in astonishment in a scene inspired by Paolo Veronese's "Madonna in Glory Worshipped by Anthony Abbot and Paul the Hermit," according to Tetzlaff. Yet, the image descending upon them is a hot-air balloon, not the Virgin Mary.

Thomas Allen

Unlike Tetzlaff's paintings, Allen's works really are photographs. He gets inspiration from pop-up books and creates his own by cutting out and re-positioning images from illustrated books and photographing them to create a new story.

Allen's work is elegant, simple and layered, at its best. For example, "Swell" features a cutout of a drawing of a ship that pops up from a thick, rolling wave of pages in a huge dictionary..

However, occasionally Allen's mini narratives turn facile, as in "Timber," which shows a cowboy falling out of the front cover of a novel titled "Mineral Gulch Trail." It's a good gag, but it doesn't rise to the level of complexity of his other works.

Adam Wolpa

Wolpa's artist statement offers a clue to the accessibility of his work. It's not an essay, like other artist statements in this show, but a flow chart showing links between various subheadings under the categories of "Public Self," "Themes," "Private Self" and "Symbols (Code System)."

Wolpa's work is similarly indirect and sometimes inscrutable. He doesn't intend for you to get these layered, multimedia collages at a glance.

For example, "The Gem Mine" has an odd assortment of elements including the letters GEM, which spell out over a spill of army-fatigue greens and browns on one side, and faint writing.

What does it mean? You decide.

Meredith Ridl

Ridl's meditative, muted oil paintings seem to be about nothing. They show bits of torn paper or stray pieces of string in barren rooms or nebulous spaces and exude a feeling of emptiness.

Unlike Tetzlaff's ultra-detailed works, Ridl's painting style leaves rough edges, fuzziness, something to the imagination. In these gray areas, she hopes to evoke the ephemeral.

In her statement, she writes, "Even the most fragile traces – a fingerprint, a scrap of paper, a coffee stain – can be steadfast reminders, connecting us to our very being and to the mysterious intimacy that unfold within the mundane."