

# ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

## Shows illustrate art-design connection

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We live at a curious moment when design in all its manifestations — furniture, fashion, graphic and industrial — often trumps the visual arts that have been traditionally seen to be superior. Anyone who has visited the Whitney Biennial, the pulse-taking exhibition of American art that continues in New York through June 1, would likely admit that vital energy is largely absent from much of the art being made today.



"Hinge 11" by Leslie Laskey, acrylic on panel  
(Courtesy of Bruno David Gallery)

But at the same time, you'd probably have to go back to the Bauhaus to find a moment when art and design have so intimately influenced each other. It is not unusual today for artists to make design objects and for designers to make art. Often the space between is the most interesting place to be.

Now, there are two shows in town that feature a revered design instructor who makes art and an artist who makes design objects that also happen to be art. Confused? Don't worry. You just have to take the work on its own terms.

Leslie Laskey, 86, is a professor emeritus of architecture at Washington University who taught for many years a rigorous introductory design class, the purpose of which was to weed out students who couldn't conceptualize in three-dimensions.

At the same time, he also made art. Last year a print retrospective at the Sheldon Art Galleries showed that Laskey was a skilled print maker, especially in the 1950s and '60s.

The show at Bruno David features new work from three separate series. In the front gallery, six photographic prints of damaged doll heads mine the surrealism Hans Bellmer so memorably explored at mid-century. Milder and less sexually charged than Bellmer's work, these images are still disturbing. Dolls are hollowed out surrogates for our own insecure egos. Printed soft-focus like soft-core pornography, the images are haunting, macabre. Something horrible has happened. Innocence has been betrayed.

In several of the prints, Laskey works with a scale distortion that makes the small doll heads look monumental. One of them reminds you of the massive head of Constantine displayed in the courtyard of the Capitoline Museum in Rome.

The main gallery features abstract paintings based on the form of a small metal hinge that had buckled from being burned. Laskey has no feel for the medium of painting. He applies pigment to his canvas surface lackadaisically without personal involvement or intelligence.

The final gallery proves that Laskey should stick to making works on paper. In these monoprints based on forest impressions, Laskey shows his innate feel for paper as a support and as a texture. He knows from years of experience as a print maker how pigment is absorbed, and he exploits that knowledge to make some beautiful work.

The monoprints are formalist statements. If you didn't know that the series was titled "Woodland Sketches," you might not figure out that the vertical marks that move across the horizontal sheet of paper are meant to be trees. The colors — deep greens and grays — do suggest a deep summer and autumn forest. These are melancholy, even elegiac works. Too bad they weren't hung in the main gallery.

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