

Medical arts

By Dickson Beall

January 9, 2008

This New Year brings a few new players to the St. Louis art scene. And the stages on which they play are not only galleries and museums.

Although Carmon Colangelo is the new dean of the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts for Washington University, he has stepped outside the usual art world by joining the university's vice chancellor for medical affairs Carol-Ann Uetake-Shapiro and Larry J. Shapiro, dean of the School of Medicine, in exhibiting in a medical setting his extraordinary yet small collection of odd prints.



"Devolution" by Carmon Colangelo. Courtesy of Bruno David Gallery, St. Louis, MO.

The exhibition space is little more than a hallway situated on Washington University's Farrell Learning and Teaching Center on the university's Central West End medical campus.

Often, art hung in hotels and hospitals is like comfort food — it's warm, fills the empty space, requires little thought and offers plenty of room for something that is memorable.

Finding Colangelo's work in this setting is a welcome surprise. Doctors and other health-care professionals, hurrying to their next assignments, often have found themselves stopped in their tracks — at least for a few moments — by this provocative art.

These are quirky prints, reminiscent of both Rauschenberg and Dr. Frankenstein. Yet nothing is forced. The art appears as light and whimsical as a Paul Klee drawing, with the exception of a faint whisper asking, "Has science gone wrong?" Of course, a definitive answer is never given, and Colangelo

succeeds in engaging the viewer and encouraging discourse.

As a printmaker, Colangelo uses a variety of media and processes — ink, acrylic, wax, drawing, engraving, silkscreen, intaglio, digital prints manipulated in Photoshop — to create unexpected images. Through the use of transparency, Colangelo obliterates some of the layered images and allows several other objects to show through the paper in the same place. Through these deformations, a visceral tension results — ovals seem like they ought to be circles, the rectangles should be squares and paper ought not to be torn.

Colangelo's art seeks simplicity. Beginning without a preconceived notion of how the finished print should look, he makes artistic decisions during the process, fully conscious of what went before, yet allowing his objects to undergo transformation. As the images are reprocessed,

manipulated and layered, new connections emerge.

This is art in motion. Strong ideational and visual content results from movement, the succession of images in the process of change. In brief, Colangelo's art is a dramatic and sophisticated staging of time.

In "Evolution," a prehistoric creature crawls on all fours toward homo erectus. Test tubes progress in size. Microscopes reveal ever greater detail.

In the companion piece, "Devolution," technology continues to accelerate until organic life is ultimately wiped out by virtual reality. Formally, Colangelo accomplishes this effect by use of the straight line, a rarity in nature, which obliterates the complexity of life. Real life morphs into

scan lines and electronic digits.

With this exhibition of just 11 prints, Colangelo successfully brings art into the arena of medical science and opens a dialogue regarding some of the most important questions of our age.

Colangelo uses a bizarre visual language of mice, rabbits, flowers, pharmaceuticals, blood corpuscles, arteries, stem cells, skeletons and spiders to raise awareness of the body bazaar — the selling of body parts and other questionable practices.

His taxonomy of spiders is only the starting point for a discourse concerning the perhaps justifiable human fear of becoming simply another experiment for the sake of science. No, not all spiders are poisonous. And

not all science is progress, or so Colangelo seems to suggest.

This remarkable exhibition is somewhat flawed by an abundance of light coming from the northern exterior windows that creates a glare on the glass, rendering the prints more difficult to view on a bright day. Sunscreens would help. But this minor drawback is more than offset by the opportunity to view astonishing art in a medical context.

• *Carmon Colangelo: Prints* continues through Jan. 31 at the Farrell Learning and Teaching Center in the Washington University School of Medicine, 520 S. Euclid Ave.