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'Traces' exhibit features trash reborn as visual art treasures

By Chris King Of the St. Louis American

A recent visitor to the studio of Thomas Sleet in the DeBalivere neighborhood did an amazing thing - he stepped on one of the pieces of art!

No damage done.

The piece, like the others in Sleet's show *TRACES* that opens Friday at Bruno David Gallery, started its life, in a physical sense, as a large carpet scrap. (Sleet equally accurately calls it an "acrylic mat.") Though the piece is now much more than a large rug, it remains as resilient. The quick crunch of a visitor's sneaker only contributed, slightly, to its texture.

Sleet achieved that texture by pouring concrete on the acrylic mat, working with plastic barricade fencing (that orange stuff with diamond shapes) to create a pattern. During and after the hardening process, Sleet added color to the concrete in the form of acrylic paint, which mingled with the dyes in the carpet threads to create strange episodes of color.

When I saw one of these pieces hanging on the wall, rather than lying on the floor waiting to be framed, it reminded me of certain abstract paintings by Gerhard Richter. Sleet agreed, nonchalantly. He has been doing this



Thomas Sleet's solo show "Traces" opens Friday at Bruno David Gallery, 3721 Washington Blvd.

thing a long time and isn't easy to impress with comparisons or praise.

Like many artists (in many disciplines) who remain creative over the long haul in a place like St. Louis, where audience and institutional support can be hard to come by, Sleet sticks stubbornly to his own vision.

The current evolution of that vision is all about salvage and change.

"The impetus of this show is the same as the title: *Traces*," Sleet said - "traces of culture, of nature, of geologic time."

This helps to explain the reliance on salvaged material, which always bears traces of other events, other lives. Sleet likes to wander along our rivers - the big ones, the Mississippi, Missouri and Meramec rivers - because they are places that bear countless traces.

One piece in the Bruno David show, "Bone River," testifies to this facet of rivers.

"A river has an archaeology to it," Sleet said.

"It's unseen to the eye. All we see is the water flowing. We don't see the stuff being carried along by the river."

He indicated the "Bone River" piece, a large and textured swirl of browns with white elliptical patterning from the barricade fencing.

"It's like all these traces that have accreted," Sleet said.

"It's reminiscent of the channelization of water and mud, you know, silt."

There is more to this than what meets the eye. Asked if the spirit also gets channeled, like water and mud, Sleet's answer is matter-of-fact: "Yeah."

That's another reason why he walks along rivers.

"I just meditate," he said. "Not in a trained sense. It's like communion."

Sleet has passed through intensive mask-making episodes in his work. Classic 99 FM was rocking his studio with European symphonic jams when I visited, but Sleet has done his time communing with Africa and its spirits.

Making art, Sleet said, is "like communicating with another intelligence. The intelligence is not in the piece, it's emanating out of it."

The piece I had inadvertently walked on (which is to say, worked on) bears the working title of *Twa*, the name of a minority people of Central Africa once known by the outmoded name of "pygmy."

The basic material was dyed red. The action of the concrete added a

volcanic texture to this red fabric, which Sleet then worked with red, yellow, black and blue acrylic paints.

Asked what he was trying to get out of the piece, Sleet said, "I'm not trying to get anything out of the piece. I work on a piece until it starts talking to me. I'm trying to develop a piece that talks."



What does *Twa* say?

"This just asks one basic question," Sleet said: "'Who are you?' It asked me that while I was creating it."

"Who," I asked, "are you?"

Sleet shrugged. "I don't know. This piece just asked me that question one day, and I figured I was done at that point."

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