

Art

Studies in contrast

Survival vs. decay; guilt vs. innocence

Calvin Brown: "Paradigm and Decay (in memory of Frank Smith)" And Related Works, at the Genovese Gallery, 535 Albany St., through June 9.

innocenceguilt, photographs by Gabrielle Russomagno and constructions by Phillip Schwartz, at Different Angle Gallery, 35 Wareham St., through June 9.

by Cate McQuaid

Time intrudes on even the most precisely laid plans. Calvin Brown's works, currently at the Genovese Gallery, are models of precision and order, like visual documents of reason and understanding—until he leaves them out in the rain and lets time and the elements make a mockery of his frail maps of reality.

but take on the aura of small, repeated icons of a moral code based on reason and logic, simple as arithmetic.

Soon after the epoxy paint dried, Brown took the plates outside and left them there, in the rain and scorching mid-summer sun, for three weeks. The epoxy held, bright and unmarred by the elements, but the steel rusted in speckles and blotches, undermining whatever sense of order the artist created in the first place. The plus signs are still there, amidst the decay, setting up a nervy tension between the wear of chaos and time and the force of human reason.

Rust is a remarkable material, and Brown makes good use of it—not only as a reference to time and industrial decay, but in contrast to other, equally lush materials. "Plate Protection and Culture (Violet)" juxtaposes two panels of the harsh rusty steel with three panels of deep purple crushed velvet. The velvet, streaked and shadowy, like an emperor's luxurious cape or a stage curtain, is unabashedly seductive. The steel seems to rise out of the velvet as if an elegant mask had been torn off to reveal a hard, spent face beneath. But with time, the streaked, rough rust reveals its own peculiar beauty—one that actually complements the luxuriant texture of the velvet.

As if to acknowledge the steel as the true face of what he presents in this piece, Brown has positioned a white plus sign in the middle of each rusted panel, balanced by black minus signs above and below it. These signs echo the give and take of the steel with the velvet, like yin and yang.

Different Angle Gallery's current show is titled "innocenceguilt," and the exhibit is set up in such a way that innocence and guilt stare at one another from opposite walls.

Gabrielle Russomagno's photographs speak to innocence on the edge of knowledge. Russomagno has taken black and white, documentary-style photographs of a number of pre-adolescent girls, hovering at that cusp between pure, innocent delight in their bodies and the

shattering fall into self-consciousness that happens between the ages of nine and thirteen.

The photographs are disturbing: doe-eyed girls pout at the camera, or stare off into space in boredom or contempt. Each is full owner of her own body in a way she might never be again once the norms of society crowd in on her, and boys become mirrors for approval.

A child is a naturally evocative image, and it's difficult to break through the stereotypes to find the true person beneath the expected vulnerability and preciousness; the artist has achieved this handily. Her subjects can't help but exhibit the beauty and innocence of youth, but there is pain and confusion and a deep, personal sensuality here which has nothing to do with what the viewer—or the artist, or even the girls' parents—might want to see. Russomagno has a keen, compassionate eye.

Phillip Schwartz's constructions of wood and copper are at once delicate and profoundly earthy, like fossils or artifacts. His wall hangings are spidery gilt copper hammered onto slabs of found wood, grainy and moist-looking. "Bulb" has a green oxidized copper scarab beetle inching its way up a piece of a barn door; red paint has soaked into the grain of the wood like stain. At the top, a shiny green dragonfly with gilt and green wings seems to quiver, about to take flight.

Schwartz builds people, too: gawky men with jutting chins and penises and loose joints, mouths agape, dancing and gangly like lost souls in hell. "King of the Damned" fills the guilty bill of the show's title. He stands on a slab of wood that is carved into the shape of two feet. Two long beams of wood lead up to his pelvis; he's got a green copper fig leaf nailed to his crotch, and a leafy vine twists around his long body. A wooden hand is nailed to this king's heart with a blood red, stigmata-like nail, and held up to warn off the innocent. His head is a flat wooden skull in profile, complete with gaping eyesockets. "King of the Damned" is more than merely guilty; he's condemned.

Local video emporium.