

Fresh visions hard to find: ArtHouston offers a few shows worth the visit

By Patricia C. Johnson

There's a lot of boring abstraction under ArtHouston's tent this summer. Margaret Evangeline at New Gallery, Larry Graeber at Gremillion and Dmitri Koustov at Anya Tish all rehash principles of nonobjective painting with little verve of freshness.

Images of Frank Zappa on clay tablets at Redbud Gallery tell us nothing other than the artist, Hans Molzburger of Germany, is fascinated by the rock star's craggy visage. At Thornwood, the sculpture garden and gallery walls are hung, salonlike, in a mish-mash of styles from more than 40 artists. Even the better paintings appear instantly dismissible.

At McMurtrey Gallery, Diana Dopson presents deliberately out-of-focus, manipulated color photographs that suggest dreamy memories and pluck the chords of nostalgia. She also offers tightly composed boxes deigned to resemble 19th-century insect specimen displays. Unfocused pictures of the insects occupy the lids, along with details of their vegetal habitats. They are not only redundant but also contrived.

Martin Elkort's photographs at John Cleary, on the other hand, are sharply focused black-and-whites. They record traditional scenes from cute kids to urban vignettes, but lack the compelling vision that transforms the commonplace onto the notable.

A few fine shows pop up among the 37 participating galleries. Of the dozen I visited Saturday, two were memorable.

Sarah Greene Reed's digital collages at Moody Gallery capture the eye. Combining figures and patterns, she composes sensuous, frequently humorous and exotic images. Saturated color and the variety of recognizable forms in unusual contexts —a framed picture of a rooster set in Asian décor,

for instance — coax a careful seeing. The overlays are obvious, but the relationship among them is vague. Dissecting them visually leads to unexpected finds.

Koelsch Gallery has a group show featuring an array of delicate folk and dramatic work. A passionate, brilliantly colored acrylic painting by Bobbie Bennet, *Love Shack*, dominates one of the gallery's rooms. Another space spotlights the figure as represented by garments. Here are two children's outfits, circa 1900, shaped from supple sheet lead by Marilyn Lanfrea. Chicago's Mr. Imagination also shaped men and women's garments, roughly, from thin wire.

Donna Rosenthal went a step further giving us couples, represented by their formal garments — a suit and flounced gown — with phrases of conversation emblazoned across their chests.

Fragile, abstract assemblages of fabric and beads by Ellen Tuchman complete the idiosyncratic show.

Somewhere between the awful and the intriguing is the classicism of still-life painting at Harris Gallery. Janis Porter Marckstein's oils are highly competent and occasionally surprising. *Slice of Life*, facing you at the entrance of the gallery, is a juicy invitation issued by slices of lush watermelon sunbathing on a rock wall.

Her companion in the exhibit, who goes by the name Rouaud, takes less traditional subjects. A series of little canvases portray a snail, a tortoise, a green pepper against pristine white dropcloths, like models posing for high-fashion studio shots.

In the tradition of animal portraiture, Rouaud gives us *Alamo*, a massive longhorn facing full-front but with body angled to show his power. He has a painterly companion, *Tex*, an elegant mastiff who reclines like a superstar for a Hollywood shoot, his pointed ears at full attention.

Then there's the tiny trio of canvases picturing bugs — a fly, bee, ladybug — painted lifesize and so lifelike against blank grounds that you might be tempted to shoo them off the wall. There are many rewards to be found in unpretentious, good painting.