

Art and science intersect at Abilene's Grace Museum

by Greg Jaklewicz

Scruby, Smith, Chadbourne And Sokal Exhibits Show A Convergence Leads To Wonder.

"Do not touch." Aw, but you want to. You really want to.

The "Art + Science = Wonder" exhibition at The Grace Museum draws in viewers to the point that fingers inch closer, and closer, and closer ...

Any second, though, rapper MC Hammer is likely to jump out with this friendly reminder:

"U Can't Touch This."

A greatly visual and highly irresistible exhibition pairs artists Rusty Scruby and Shawn Smith, whose styles vary but objectives are similar, downstairs. On the second floor, the intriguing work of Conan Chadbourne and Paul Sokal are found.

The Scruby-Smith exhibition is subtitled "Deliberate Distraction." Their pieces most often really are pieces.

For Scruby, his pieces are woven, if you will, to create the large image. For example, playing cards create a compelling design when creatively (and carefully) assembled. He obviously knows when to hold 'em, and when (and how) to fold 'em.

Smith, on the hand, is the self-described "glue and nail guy."



"Oculus" is a 2011 work by Rusty Scruby constructed of playing cards.
(Photo: Greg Jaklewicz/Reporter-News)

Pieces by Scruby, who lives in Dallas, and Smith, who now is in Austin, have been exhibited here before, in a group show out of Austin eight or so years ago that spotlighted 20 artists to watch.

The two artists are acquainted and have pieces for sale at a gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico. But the Abilene show has brought them together on a grander scale.

"It is a great show," Smith said.

While their styles may differ, the end result is an image that is both recognizable at a distance but more specific upon closer inspection.

Think a lower resolution photograph becoming pixelated when it is enlarged. We see the individual pieces that comprise the whole.

For this show, the point is that science and art overlap in several ways.

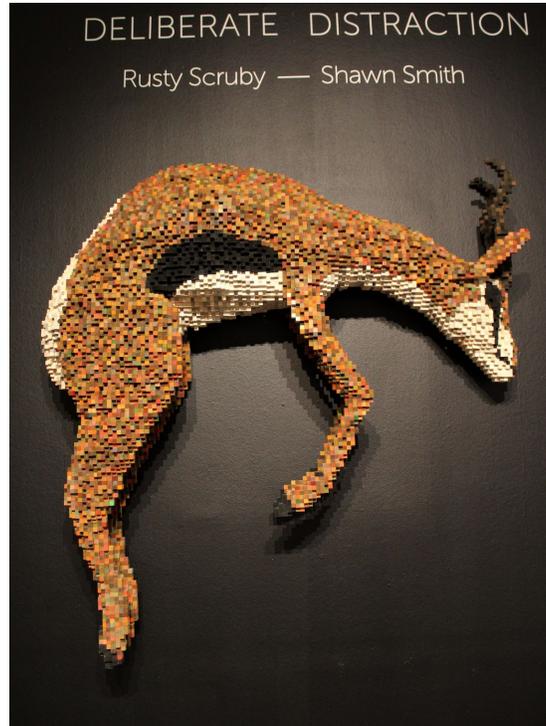
"My work investigates the slippery intersection between the digital world and reality. Specifically, I am interested in how we experience nature through technology," Smith says on his website, shawnsmithart.com.

Smith grew up in Dallas, where his only association with nature was at a park or from a screen (computer, video game, television). He came to realize his view was nothing close to the real thing, so his art mission has been emphasize his own changeover: he takes two-dimensional images and transforms them into three-dimensional art that keeps the online imagery. Pixel by pixel, he constructs his art.

"I am interested in how each pixel plays an important role in the identity of the object, the same way each cell plays a crucial role in the identity of an organism," he said.

How he does it

His method to producing art began with a graduate school project titled "Re-Frankenstein." He took the Mary Shelley story and using a "web scraper" program, transformed each word to an image. What he observed was how many natural images were produced. Together, the thousands of images contributed to Shelley's timeless story.



"Stotting Thomson's Gazelle" greets visitors to the downstairs gallery at The Grace Museum, where the art of Shawn Smith and Rusty Scruby is displayed. This is Smith's piece, a 2014 work of basswood, balsa, ink and acrylic paint.

(Photo: Greg Jaklewicz/Reporter-News)

Smith's work became its own book.

Thus started his interest in how art relates to nature. Instead of trying to be exact, he remains in a "naive" state, which allows the old-school video game image of, say, a gorilla, to remain.

He said his work retains about 85 percent of an online image. If he kept it 100 percent, he said, it would "feel a little stoic and lifeless."

"I ad-lib a little, which feels more like drawing," he said. He said drawing brings forth a sense of immediacy, which adds life to his work.

For his rhino piece titled "Harmony of Decay," he has created an animal out of a multitude of painted cubes. He used woodworking tools to create small strips

of plywood that were assembled and painted. Smith compares his workday to running a distance race — some days it's three hours and others 12 hours. He goes until he completes the distance the day requires.

The Grace is the first museum to display "Harmony of Decay," and it seems a popular gallery destination for old and young alike, who can circle the piece that rests on the floor.

A twist to this particular piece is the northern white rhino is at the edge of extinction. During the two months it took Smith to construct his project, the last male died. Sperm was kept in an effort to avoid extinction.



The face of a gorilla becomes a pattern of painted cubes upon closer inspection of "Eroding King," a 2018 plywood, ink and acrylic paint work by Shawn Smith.

(Photo: Greg Jaklewicz/Reporter-News)

His adding of realistic mushrooms on and around the rhino certainly offers color but could suggest — though he said it's not intended to be an artist's statement

— the animal returning to nature. However, the inside joke is that mushrooms feed off decaying wood, and his rhino is made of plywood.

Young visitors wonder how the large piece (the rhino itself weighs 220 pounds) got into the museum gallery. Well, the rhino comes apart (even smaller parts, such as the ears, so those don't break), as does its base.

The piece will be traveling to an exhibit in Chicago after the Abilene show.



"Self Portrait" is a 2011 work by Rusty Scruby, an archival photographic reconstruction.
(Photo: Greg Jaklewicz/Reporter-News)