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Three artists are teamed for Charlotte Street Foundation exhibition

By Alice Thorson
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Who needs drugs when you can watch Ari Fish's video installation at Grand Arts?

Maybe it's the intimations of spiritual awakening. Maybe it's the waves of energy that the work transmits through a kind of kinesthetic telepathy.

In any case, this mesmerizing presentation, installed in a darkened gallery as part of the Charlotte Street Foundation 2010 Awards Exhibition, induces euphoria.

Forget about fashion, the domain that Fish briefly inhabited as a 2009 contestant on cable TV's "Project Runway."



Fish is a garment maker, but she is also a video and performance artist. The 2006 Kansas City Art Institute grad deploys all of her skills to enact a vision of liberation in "speak and spell, show and tell."

The imagery — individual vignettes of 11 people (including the artist) performing moves from the Chinese martial art of Qigong — is a celebration of the body freed from the habitual motions of everyday tasks and pursuits.

Fish instructed the performers to "pay attention to the energy that goes through the body." She reinforced this focus on energy through her editing, adding

ghostly overlays, blurs of motion and dissolves to particle-charged white.

One after another, each performer appears on a series of white silk banners suspended from the ceiling at regular intervals. The multiple images, synchronized but located at a different height on each banner for a wave effect, appear as a series of visual echoes.

All of the performers wear the same loose robe with a pull-up hood, created by Fish from lightweight cotton jersey patterned with colored stripes and geometric shapes.

It looks great in motion, but the genius of this garment, inspired by priest robes



from different cultures, is that it frees the body from the usual assessing gaze, focusing attention on what it can do, not its physical attributes.

A rhythmic soundtrack, created in

collaboration with artist and musician Ashley Miller, incorporates a bass line sampled from the whirl of the artist's sewing machine, as well as digitally enhanced notes struck on a thumb piano. There is also a percussive snapping and clapping, which includes the sound of Miller slapping Fish's legs. An otherworldly voice overlay repeats the phrase, "I don't know," which in this context connotes both an unencumbered mental state and a humble admission of lack of knowledge.

Fish said the performers were "the healers — people who have been there for me." She said that when she watched them perform, "I wanted to cry." For all its focus on physical motion, the work is steeped in spirituality.

The Charlotte Street Foundation gave three awards of \$10,000 each to visual artists this year, which marks the program's 13th round of grants. Since 1997 it has disbursed almost half a million dollars to 78 artists.

Sonie Ruffin

It's now clear that fabric artist Sonie Ruffin, the senior member among this year's winners, has been ahead of the curve all along when it comes to breaking art-world boundaries.

Today's cutting-edge art is all about mixing high and low, craft and art, and broadening awareness of large areas of history and experience once relegated to the fringes.

Ruffin's been doing this for years, turning quilt-making into a forum for sharing important stories and cultural commentary about the African-American experience.

Her large triptych, "Wynton Marsalis' Conversation With Jazz," exemplifies her use of form and color to convey ideas and stories without resort to pictorialism.

A black and gold palette lends a regal cast to this animated abstraction. Colorful dots of hand-dyed fabric double as notes, and streamers of needlepoint thread convey reverberations of sound.

In her essay in the accompanying brochure, Lacey Wozny, Grand Arts' assistant director, traces the work's inspiration to Ruffin's first experience of jazz at a Holiday Inn in Joplin, Mo., when she was 8 years old, and her adult encounter with Marsalis at the Gem Theater in 2005.

In "Home Run" (2009), Ruffin leaves the free-form composition of her Marsalis quilt to return to the traditional grid, but only to a point.

"It's not lined up," she says of its slightly skewed squares. "I don't like lines."

She created the work from a fabric she designed that resembles African mud cloth. It was inspired, she



said, by the female African artisans whose designs tell stories or send a message.

Ruffin's piece, executed in black and ivory, invokes the story of Jackie Robinson, the first black major-league baseball player in modern times.

"The ivory is Branch Rickey," Ruffin explained, referring to the general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers who signed Robinson in 1947.

Repeated motifs include diamond patterns, interweaving stripes of black and white, and soaring white dots. Tiny images of hands and a snail-like spiral also make repeated appearances.

"The hands on that piece are the hands that helped him get into baseball," Ruffin said. The spirals reflect her belief that "we have to move at snail's pace. Back in history it wasn't the ones moving the fastest. It was ones moving consistently in the same direction."

A series of six individual blocks featuring Kandinsky-like clusters of expanding geometric forms is "the most emotional piece," Ruffin said. She organized the shapes to suggest human figures and added multiple sewn lines of gold thread that suggest rays of light.

Ruffin titled it "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," after the Negro national anthem written by James Weldon Johnson, and installed a vinyl text of his poem on the wall nearby.

Caleb Taylor

Caleb Taylor is not one of those abstract painters who reflects nature or seeks to evoke mental states. His activity is centered on concepts and a conversation with artists who precede him.

Earlier paintings presented color-field skins of paint with cutout shapes revealing a gestural underlay. His Charlotte Street display contrasts works embodying this approach with a move to shake it up a bit

Taylor's most recent pieces give foreground prominence to knots of gesture, and in some cases they abandon the fields of color altogether.

The move is most pronounced in "Gesture-Knot," a large cut-aluminum wall piece with a white-painted surface and glowing pink edges.

Taylor's knots align with a "web" model of postmodern reality, which has come to replace the modernist grid. As scholar Mark C. Taylor writes in his book, "The Moment of Complexity," "Webs link and relate, entangling everyone in multiple mutating and mutually defining connections in which nobody is really in control."



Taylor underlines the tension between the two models by displaying nine works on paper — including three that simply present knots cut from colored paper on white backgrounds — in a grid configuration.

Although the interplay is engaging, the works feel transitional, with the prominent knot form owing too obvious a debt to the signature motif of abstractionist Jonathan Lasker.

Yet as Wozny notes in her essay, "Taylor progresses quickly from one phase to another," so chances are he's already solved this little glitch in his ongoing work in the studio.

Taylor has found a solid foundation in his gesture-knot combination. The gesture takes us back to Abstract Expressionism and the intimacy of the artist's hand. The knot fast-forwards to a new day, formalizing those earlier tangled and overlapping skeins into an emblem of ever-changing, interdependent relationships.