

Spaces Within

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RAM

Exhibition TeacherGuide

Spaces Within

CURATOR STATEMENT

Spaces Within examines art relating to the architecture of the interior. This exhibit features the work of fellow Chicago painters **Richard Hull** and **Nicholas Sistler**, each of whom create unique environments through the use of confined spaces, bold perspectives, and exuberant color. The late Chicago artist **David Kotker** (1961–2005) makes a three-dimensional contribution to the exhibit with his attenuated bronze sculptures. Geometric principles are further explored in a selection of work from the RAM Permanent Collection, including paintings by **Gordon Dorn** and **Michiko Itatani**.

Richard Hull's paintings are a striking blend of figurative and abstract elements. Architectural structures, usually rectilinear in nature, typify his early work. A fantastic array of cityscapes, skylines and geometric shapes dominate the compositions. Looming figures, ambiguous in appearance, create an otherworldly presence. Employing diverse materials such as oil, wax and crayon, Hull scratches into surfaces creating an elaborate web of marks that further define form.

Nicholas Sistler's tightly cropped interiors capture a diminutive world in exquisite detail. Akin to 17th century Dutch still-life and genre scenes, these uninhabited works, painted in gouache, depict domestic interiors. Despite the diminutive scale these paintings have a monumental feeling. Visually compelling, these scenes appear as if viewed through a keyhole. Pictures drawn mostly from Film Noir stills become apparitions on random objects. Juxtaposed forms and jutting angles further jar and disorient.

David Kotker's iconic figures, executed in the 1980s, add a sculptural element to *Spaces Within*. A distinctive quality to his bronze work is the exquisite and varied finishes of the patinas. Kotker's sensitively realized totemic forms, tribal in nature, are reminiscent of work from the Etruscan Period.

A note of gratitude to the institutions and galleries who have shared artwork: Benedictine University, Corbett vs. Dempsey Gallery, McDonald's Corporation, Printworks Gallery, The University Club of Chicago, Western Exhibitions, and Zolla/Lieberman Gallery. A personal thank you to the lenders who have contributed works from their private collections to this show. Lastly, thanks to Richard Hull and Nicholas Sistler, whose contributions to *Spaces Within* are immeasurable.

Patty Rhea

Exhibition Curator

Curator, Rockford Art Museum

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DIDACTIC PANELS

Richard Hull (American, b. 1955)

1

Richard Hull's new work explores spatial relationships, both metaphorically and formally, between the geometric dualities of empty and full spaces. The prevalent imagery—a biomorphic shape that resembles a horse's tail—gives viewers the visual sensation of being simultaneously located both inside and out. Reverberating concentric lines inside the primary shapes allude to movement and connectivity, and can be thought of as pathways, highways or circulatory systems. Inside these pulsating pathways are several series of dots, ellipses, concentric squares, and other diagrammatic marks that the artist thinks of as architectural, almost like apartment complexes. Eyeball-like images crop up in several works, perhaps alluding to the artist's partial vision in one eye.

Paintings such as *Elegy for the City* and *Night and Day*, both from 2009, look out as much as they look in. Past works kept to an earth-toned palette and heavily worked surfaces; bright, directly applied high-keyed color now plays the prominent role. In Hull's words, "color has become its own entity."

2

Architectural details depicting abstracted interiors or house shapes define Richard Hull's earlier paintings. Dark and introspective in temperament, the artist employs diverse materials such as oil, wax and crayon. Relying on an earth-toned palette, Hull scratches into surfaces, creating an elaborate web of marks that further define the interiors.

3

Saturn, 1997, oil and wax ground
Courtesy of the artist

Skeletal forms and organic curvilinear shapes provide structure for Richard Hull's 1997 painting *Saturn*. This imposing portrait depicts Saturn, chief of the Titans. Saturn was a Roman god of agriculture – Protector of the Sowers and the Seed. In antiquity, the festival of Saturnalia was annually held in his honor.

A fantastic array of cityscapes, archways and geometric forms dominate this active composition. Hull uses a meandering line and brilliant color to create rhythm and movement, effectively drawing the viewer into the inner space.

1

Artist Statement, 2010

I am interested in the irony of creating a deep space and/or a monumental scale within a very small area. This paradox of a diminutive realm encourages the viewer to leave the everyday world behind.

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The figurative images illustrate power relationships within the world of the particular painting. To keep the diminutive scenes open for the viewer to "enter," the figures don't occupy the spaces but appear in pictures on the walls, floors or tabletops. These images of figures are in dialogue with the domestic interiors they inhabit, each adding to the story of the other.

A power relationship also exists between the viewer and my paintings. The brilliant color and intricate detail seduces, and invites intimacy with the painting. The size relationship between the viewer's body and the small scale of the painting allows the viewer physical dominance over the painting as an object, while a low perspective contradicts this supremacy, persuading the viewer to be submissive to the image. This physical/psychological tension is an additional irony; the heart of what holds the viewer's attention, questioning the viewer's power and their very physicality.

2

Green Stool Tipped Over, 2003, gouache on board
Courtesy of the artist and Printworks Gallery, Chicago

Looking for something?

This room is dominated by the photo-mural of a woman. She appears to be sorting through the contents of a purse, as if seeking something specific. We, too, are sorting and seeking: through this painting for some kind of meaning. Begin in the upper right corner; follow the orange band diagonally through the photo image, past her purse to the key hung on the wall (is that what she's looking for?). If you continue this line, you'll land on the glowing, orange dot outside (a tail light? a cigarette?). There's an ambiguity between the world of the photo image and the world of the room it is in. The joke here is that she couldn't stand up straight in this room; the ceiling is too close to her head.

3

Approaching Twilight, 2005, gouache on board
Courtesy of the artist and Printworks Gallery, Chicago

Light and dark; twilight is the balancing point between the two.

Frederick Douglass, famous for being highly educated at a time when slavery still dominated the plight of most African Americans, is portrayed here in a bright light. An unlit candle, a source of light typical of Mr. Douglass' period, sits before his image. The other two photo images are also of African Americans (if more abstracted), but from mid and late 20th century. At the far left a man stares directly at us (at the camera), but his face below his eyes is concealed by a bright turquoise piece of furniture. The middle photo conjures up another man's face, but the features above the nose remain in shadow. Books, and their embodied knowledge, lie in a disheveled pile in the foreground.

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4

Flashlight and Candle, 2006, gouache on board
Courtesy of the artist and Printworks Gallery, Chicago

Light, looking, seeing. This painting oddly combines recognizable images and geometric abstractions. The severe angles, the product of a forced perspective, add to a sense of disorientation.

The flashlight, centrally positioned, is fairly easy to find with its bright beacon, but the candle, being pushed very close to the picture plane and partially cropped off by the right edge, may take more than a moment to notice. The photo image on the right is a film still from *The Invisible Man* (he wears dark glasses to hide not his eyes, but his invisibility); the glow from the candle further blinds us to his visage. The photo image toward the left shows startled eyeballs stacked vertically, but the skewed perspective slants them nearly 45 degrees, approaching a more expected horizontal alignment, making it easier for our eyes to “read” them.

David Kotker (American, 1961–2005)

The late Chicago artist David Kotker makes a three-dimensional contribution to *Spaces Within* with his attenuated bronze sculptures. These iconic figures, executed in the 1980s, were completed when the artist was in his mid-twenties.

A distinctive quality to Kotker's bronze work is the exquisite and varied finishes of the patinas. These sensitively realized forms, tribal in nature, are reminiscent of work from the Etruscan Period.

David Kotker was an Artist-in-Residence at Rockford Art Museum in 1987. His accomplishments as a tattooist in Chicago and Amsterdam earned him an international reputation in this field.

Gordon Dorn (American, b. 1943)
Synergism I, 1987, encaustic and dry pigment
Collection of Rockford Art Museum

“Geometry is the abstract content of architecture. That’s where architecture starts. My paintings, in a non-objective way, dismantle architecture and carry it back to its original geometry.”—Gordon Dorn

The constant within many of Dorn's compositions is the grid, a system of coordinate lines that are employed as a structuring device. The artist's abstractions are linked to the idea that architectural systems and configurations have inherent aesthetic as well as utilitarian qualities.

Dorn's paintings are inspired by the architecture of the industrial era, when iron and steel supports became the standard means of structuring large spaces.

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Synergism I is one of four large paintings that make up the artist's 1987 "Synergism" series, which followed his 1981–82 "Grid" series. Each individual painting is considered complete by itself, but when placed in relation to the others, the series shows the alteration of a basic image over a period of time. In these works the grid takes on the illusion of a third dimension. It appears as a shape or form floating in deep space. The paintings are still very abstract but the grid is used less as a means to structure surface and more as an object within itself. The change from a relatively flat patterning effect to three-dimensional pictorial space is significant in that it breaks with the orientation of modernist painting toward flatness.

The rich surface quality is attributed to the use of encaustic, a technique of applying melted wax mixed with color pigment onto the surface that was originally used in the first century. Dorn's use of encaustic varies greatly from that of other artists in that he applies the wax as a thin wash only, and does not mix paint in with the melted wax but rubs dry pigment on the wax ground before it sets completely.

—Excerpted from *Gordon Dorn: Paintings/Drawings* exhibition catalogue, essay by Jan Provenzano, © 1987 Rockford Art Museum.

EXHIBITION VOCABULARY

Abstract art: Imagery which departs from representational accuracy. Abstract artists select and then exaggerate or simplify the forms suggested by the world around them.

Encaustic: The medium, technique or process of painting with molten wax (mostly beeswax), resin, and pigments that are fused after application into a continuous layer and fixed to a support with heat, and achieves a lustrous enamel appearance.

Geometric: Any shape or form having more mathematic than organic design. Geometric designs are typically made with straight lines or shapes from geometry, including circle, ovals, triangles, rectangles, squares, and other quadrilaterals, along with such polygons as pentagons, hexagons, etc.

Negative space: Empty space in an artwork; a void.

Perspective: The technique artists use to project an illusion of the three-dimensional world onto a two-dimensional surface. Perspective helps to create a sense of depth — of receding space. Fundamental techniques used to achieve perspective are: controlling variation between sizes of depicted subjects, overlapping some of them, and placing those that are on the depicted ground as lower when nearer and higher when deeper.

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Positive space: Space in an artwork that is positive — filled with something, such as lines, designs, color, or shapes. The opposite of negative space.

Rhythm: A visual tempo or beat. The principle of design that refers to a regular repetition of elements of art to produce the look and feel of movement. It is often achieved through the careful placement of repeated components which invite the viewer's eye to jump rapidly or glide smoothly from one to the next.

Three-dimensional: Having, or appearing to have, height, width, and depth.

Two-dimensional: Having height and width, but no depth; flat

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Alberto Giacometti Sculpture

David Kotker's sculptures are reminiscent of Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti's tall, gaunt figures. In this lesson, students will recreate the look of the expressive figures by Giacometti and Kotker.



photo of Giacometti by Henri Cartier-Bresson



photo of Kotker by Steven Arzmus, 1986, © Museum of Contemporary Photography

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Activity

- Create the structure of the figure with wire. Take a 3-foot piece, lace its center and make an inverted triangle for shoulders and torso. Twist it together at the waist and leave the rest for the legs. Repeat with the 15-inch piece, making a loop for the head and attaching it to the shoulders. Use the 24-inch piece to make arms, wrapping it around the shoulders and forming small loops for hands
- Determine the pose and push ends of wire legs through Styrofoam base. Working from underneath, pole the ends of the wires into the base again to secure.
- Warp aluminum foil around the wire figure to build out the form. To make an expressive, Giacometti-style figure, exaggerate the length of the limbs and torso. Make large, solid feet. Keep the foil's "crinkle" texture. Cover the top and bottom of the base as well.
- Mix together papier-mâché paste mixture in a bowl. Tear pieces of paper and dip into paste mixture. Press the paper onto the foil and brush the edges down. Continue to apply paper until form is completely covered, including the top and bottom of the base. Brush a final coat of paste onto sculpture and allow to dry overnight.
- Coat the paper with a matte black acrylic paint. When dry, lightly paint metallic bronze paint over the form, allowing the black paint to remain visible in the recessed areas. Lightly add highlights of metallic gold paint to the raised areas.

Materials

- Sculpture wire (For each sculpture, cut one 3-foot piece, two 24-inch lengths, one 15-inch length, and four 3-inch lengths.)
- Styrofoam blocks, each 6 x 6 inches
- aluminum foil
- paint brush
- black acrylic paint
- metallic brass and gold acrylic paint
- scraps of paper (paper towels, newspaper, recycled paper, etc.)
- papier-mâché paste mixture (one part flour to two parts water)

ISBE Standards: 4A, 25AB, 26AB, 27AB

Proper Perspective

Many artists are very interested in making two-dimensional artwork look three-dimensional. During the Renaissance, artists used mathematics and close observation to invent *linear perspective* – a technique that helps artists make things appear three-dimensional. This lesson teaches the basics of drawing forms in one-point perspective.

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Activity

- Distribute paper, pencils, and rulers to students.
- Tape a piece of paper to the chalkboard for demonstration. Draw a horizontal line for the horizon, or the ground plane.
- Instruct students to draw a horizontal line on their paper using their rulers.
- On your paper, draw a dot on the center of the line, and have the students do the same. This is called the vanishing point.
- Have students draw square or rectangle, well below and to one side of their vanishing point. Have them make sure their vertical lines are perpendicular (at right angles) to their horizontal line, and make sure the horizontal lines are parallel. Emphasize no funny angles or wobbly lines! Tell them for a good perspective drawing, straight lines and corners should meet exactly.
- Next, have your students draw a line from each corner of their square or rectangle to the vanishing point. Make sure they are straight, and finish exactly at the vanishing point.
- Draw a horizontal line, starting a little way along the bottom left vanishing line, across until it joins the bottom right vanishing line. Explain that this is the bottom edge of the back of the box. Make sure it is straight – parallel to the horizon and front edge.
- Now, draw two vertical lines, straight up, from where that back line meets the two vanishing lines, up to the two top vanishing lines. Then add the horizontal line that joins them. The two biggest problems at this stage of the drawing are lines at angles—they must be straight—and lines that don't quite meet. If they stop short, or go past the vanishing line ever so slightly, with one of the lines, they'll have trouble getting their last line straight.
- If the box is close to the horizon or vanishing point, they might find that the angles are very obtuse (wide), and hard to get right.
- Now they can erase the vanishing lines. They can keep all the lines inside the box if they want it to be see-through, like a fish tank, or they can carefully erase the back corner – the bottom left, back, and lower back lines
- Now try drawing some more squares and rectangles in different places. Try one above the horizon line, and one right in the middle below the vanishing point.
- Have students draw the vanishing lines for their boxes. As long as the ruler is lined up correctly, they can stop drawing just short of the vanishing point, so that it is still easy to see, and not lost in a tangle of lines.
- Have students finish their single point perspective boxes. Have them try drawing a fish tank, an open box, and a solid box.

Materials

- pencils
- ruler
- drawing paper, 12 x 18 inches
- colored pencils or markers

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ISBE Standards: 4A, 25AB, 26AB, 27AB

WEBSITES

Rockford Art Museum	http://www.rockfordartmuseum.org
Richard Hull	http://www.westernexhibitions.com/hull/index.htm
Nicholas Sistler	http://www.nicholassistler.com
Michiko Itatani	http://www.michikoitatani.com/bio.html