



Scott Wolniak: *Musical Notes in Harmony with the Attuned Healing Colors*, 2008, digital video, 29½ minutes; at the Chicago Cultural Center.

over the past 15 years, is also a musical-theater buff, and he adapted that lyric for the name of his exhibition, “Is it the real turtle soup?” It also names one painting; other titles draw on lyrics from shows ranging from *Hair* to *Company* to *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. This kind of showbiz esoterica is destined to go over the heads of most viewers, but borrowed lyrics can have the advantage of being cheerily bright. And some names—*Ga-Ga at the Go-Go*, *Yet to be Upon His Knee* or *Low and Lazy*—fit well with Aylsworth’s nervy, slapdash style.

When the artist talks about his work—the 13 oil paintings in this show, all 2008, are modest to substantial in size—he describes “staging” his compositions, and refers to his abstract forms as characters. He treats the components as if they are actors that he, as director, is blocking in purposely awkward scenes. Bulbous or sharply angular shapes take their places with often comic gracelessness. Some collide while others are posed in a kind of standoff. Aylsworth is a fan of taste-defying color combinations that he lays on with justified faith that it will all work out in the end. His blues tend toward turquoise and his reds are rosy and pink. In *I’m 41* (at 75 by 90 inches, the largest work in the show), an enormous purple blob lists across a bright yellow canvas and heads into a gaping white shape that appears to be attempting to choke it down. There can be hints of sunny landscapes, and Aylsworth is not above evoking a seaside holiday. But then he turns around and piles together angular shapes resembling debris at a construction site.

Like the Tin Pan Alley types he admires, Aylsworth knows how to make the task look easy. Perhaps it’s a given that musical comedy is always just slightly ridiculous. But as with Aylsworth’s painting, the shows and songs he favors have one prevailing theme, and it’s worth taking seriously. The payoff of the Porter lyric that titles the exhibition comes at the end of the song. “Is it a fancy not worth thinking of? / Or is it at long last love?”

—Charles Dee Mitchell

LA JOLLA
JAY JOHNSON
 ATHENAEUM MUSC &
 ARTS LIBRARY

Jay Johnson’s installation turned its back on us, even as it delivered one of the artist’s most personal statements yet. “Smoking Room” (2009) sat at an angle in the middle of the Athenaeum’s elegant exhibition space like a huge crate waiting to be unpacked. Panels of the L-shaped wood structure (15 feet long, 4 feet wide at one end, 6 feet at the other) were numbered and variously marked in pen and pencil for easy assembly. A 2-inch slit, substantially lower than eye level, cut horizontally around the structure. This slit, and a few open knotholes, allowed the only visual access to the room within.

The crate’s interior walls and floor were painted white and served mostly as a neutral exhibition space for a collection of sculptures and prints that Johnson has made over the past 15 years, along

with an assortment of found objects and personal memorabilia, all mounted on the walls at different heights, hanging from above or resting on the floor. Johnson’s self-curated mini-survey included what the exhibition brochure identified as his earliest surviving creation (a little clay boot from a second-grade art class), evidence of his first conceptual act (a landscape painting into which he shot arrows as a boy), an intriguing drawing by his father and a baseball turned lyrical readymade through strategic unstitching.

The space also contained some of the accoutrements of a working studio—a contraption Johnson built for making monotype plates, an upholstered chair worn to shreds, a salad bowl filled with castoff bits of turned wood and a thick scattering of sawdust on a portion of the floor. A sign hanging on one wall, near an old copy of *Planning Your Home Workshop*, identified the room as a “laboratory,” further establishing a sense of experimentation and generation. The sympathetic “everyman” figures that Johnson has been making for more than a decade—small, anonymous characters engaged in everyday and vaguely acrobatic activities—popped up throughout the room in wood, copper, brass and aluminum. Also sampled were the sculptures that tweak familiar forms, such as houses, globes and bottles.

Typically, the end products of this artist’s creative process are all we see. In “Smoking Room,” Johnson offered a fuller account of the environment and sensibility from which his work emerges. He also made it clear that we can only



David Aylsworth: *I’m 41*, 2008, oil on canvas, 75 by 90 inches; at Holly Jonsson.