

VisualArts

Dana Tindall at Swanson Cralle Gallery

by Bruce Nixon

As a subject of the critical tendency to locate an artist's work referentially, as a kind of convenient shorthand, Dana Tindall is often compared to Red Grooms. Sure enough, Tindall's wall-hanging constructions seem to burst from their frames, restless, ebullient, colorful, like a cartoon world climbing through the window. It's an apt comparison, as far as it goes. It just doesn't go very far. Grooms is a man of streets, a funky boulevardier, an artist whose work seeks public proportions. Tindall applies the technique to far different ends: He is a diarist, an autobiographer, and for all their joyous cacophony, these pieces are reflective, even melancholy — intimate work that exploits an extrovert's medium.

In Tindall's exhibition at Swanson Cralle Gallery, the most obvious example of this tendency may be "Summer Series #7," in which a tricycle appears to tumble from the image, spilling across the frame to knock over a flower pot. But it is characteristic. In these pictures, collisions abound between the rambunctiousness of a small boy in the house and the domestic calm around him, though they invariably are depicted in their aftermath.

Tindall, it seems, has been adjusting to life as a relatively recent father, and the lingering atmosphere of these pieces, faintly bittersweet, gives the work a startling poignancy. The Ft. Wright, Ky.-based artist does not hide himself. Even a shift away from direct narrative — like the goldfish pond viewed from an overhead perspective in "Summer Series #4," with fish ingeniously depicted beneath a murky layer of Plexiglas while plants wave wildly around them — reveals the deeply personal affections of his day-to-day life. It's an appealing and often intriguing inversion of a more typically backslapping, rib-poking mode of assemblage.

By now, these kinds of construction techniques have been used so widely that their implied intersection with craft and folk art no longer has the impact it once did. Still, a powerful connection to vernacular art emerges in the six interactive constructions here, mostly human-scale works whose appeal to physical involvement with their viewers, together with their truly funky, homemade means of assembly, use humor to mask dark messages. They ask to be sat upon, stood on and listened to, as various taped voices mutter ominously.



"Summer Series #4," by Dana Tindall.

For example, "Union," both loveseat and confessional and resembling nothing so much as a grossly outsized wedding cake, describes the selfish fears that can obstruct a relationship. "Broken Record," even as it satirizes the surprise expressed by river rats at the 1997 Ohio River flood, offers commentary on self-absorption that infects so much of our awareness of the world. "Unavailable" is a wall-hung assemblage made from four telephone answering machines, complete with beeps. Finally, we notice the face behind bars, deep in the piece. The subject, it seems, is the use of answering machines to dodge creditors.

Tindall's constructions are at Swanson Cralle East Market Gallery, 638 E. Market St., through Nov. 18. Hours are Tuesday-Saturday, 10am-5pm.