

Feature

Taking turns

SHARON LOUDEN AT THE BMA

by STEPHEN HUMPHREYS

With the upcoming opening for New York artist Sharon Loudon, the Birmingham Museum of Art will finally be back in the contemporary art business.

The BMA went without a contemporary art curator for years, during which time the work in the contemporary galleries never changed until it almost started to feel more stale than cutting-edge for regular museum-goers. Ron Platt, since his 2007 appointment as the Hugh Kaul Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, has turned that around.

He started with the basics, by rotating fresh new work through the contemporary galleries on a regular basis. And for his first big trick, the museum is filling one of its galleries and the trees of the sculpture garden with contemporary work commissioned specifically for this space.

Louden, the artist Platt chose for this first foray, says she wanted to create a path through the museum. And Platt and Loudon shared the love of the idea of the work physically leaving the museum, to state that the impact of art does not stop there.

The path consists of three stages. The first are Loudon's paintings, in which she is concerned with gesture, though the forms are more geometric than organic. According to Loudon, she attempts to create a vocabulary, a poetic character with line, "the feeling of a quiet dance."

To Loudon, the square images in these two-dimensional works embody four sides of a gesture. She imagines people as filled with internal gestures, and tries to carry these gestures outside the object that contains them.

The paintings, in turn, lead to a projected animation of parts that assemble into these same geometric forms and images that resemble sheets of papers in motion. Where the gestures of the paintings imply movement, the animation makes

those implied feelings actually move through windows of imagination.

And the movement literally leads through the wall of the building to designs fashioned from fiber optics lighting the trees outside, in which the painting-like animation actually moves upward into space. The characters created by line actually glow as the sun goes down and the space above expands toward infinity.

The museum, by the way, is pulling off a double coup by staging the contemporary Loudon exhibition at the same time it is establishing its traditional credentials with a show of rare Leonardo DaVinci drawings. The exhibitions share an attention to graceful lines and gestures, with an exploratory quality. And of course Leonardo dreamed of his artwork soaring into space 500 years ago. Now is a good time to visit the museum and enjoy the comparison. There's something old and something new, but it's all fresh air at the BMA. Both exhibitions opened Sept. 28.

Artist Sharon Loudon and BMA curator Ron Platt will lead an "Art & Conversation" program at 6 p.m. on Friday, Oct. 3. A reception will follow.

At noon on Saturday, Oct. 4, Loudon will share her approach to creating glowing "landscapes" using custom phosphorescent paints in a program titled "The Glowtown Artist's Workshop." Participants will have a chance to create their own 12-inch 3-D cube to be combined to reveal "Glowtown" at the end of each session when they are assembled and the lights go out. The workshop is open to artists ages 6 and up. The workshop costs \$25 for members of the museum and \$30 for non-members.

For complete details on the Sharon Loudon and Leonardo da Vinci exhibitions and related programming, visit www.artsbma.org or call 254-2565.



TAKING A TURN: Sharon Loudon's work primarily focuses on gesture, line and materials.