

Partners in mischief

Bay area artists collaborate
to create individual works

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The two-gallery exhibit, "Collaboration," presents mischievous, assemblage-style ceramic works by Bay area art stars Richard Shaw and Robert Hudson, who exchange porcelain's traditional "fragility" for fun and its associations with "refinement" for rascality.

In 1973 ceramic sculptor Richard Shaw invited painter/sculptor Robert Hudson to collaborate on an exhibit of ceramic sculpture for the San Francisco Museum of Art. Then in 1997, hoping to rekindle some of the old magic, the two reunited in a residency program initiated by the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Mass.

The fruits of that last meeting form the contents of "Collaboration," an exhibit of more than 40 pieces divided between Byron C. Cohen Gallery for Contemporary Art and Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art.

Working side by side in the studio, Shaw and Hudson each created individual works utilizing familiar objects and parts of ceramic containers. Patched together like the mixed-up toys in "Toy Story," they exude a child-like curiosity and a funky, surrealist humor.

There are many similarities between the two artists' objects. Both drew from a single repertoire of slip-cast, found objects, including architectural fragments, twigs and pencils. Both also used American-kitsch, mold items such as Santa faces, cats and dolls.

The two also share a soft and breezy Bay area palette, incorporating a few bold colors, including Golden Gate Bridge orange, ocean blue and sunshine yellow.

In both bodies of work, the use of China-painting, airbrush, decaling and silk-screening applications provide much detail and texture to investigate.

Shaw and Hudson's postmodernist approach to collage and appropriation challenges conventional high/low, fine-art/craft distinctions. Tall, white pedestals may endow these twisted-kitsch concoctions with an instant aura of high-art value, but even if their familiar bits and pieces keep viewers searching for logical connections, the works' uselessness and superfluity is the point.

Many of the pieces in "Collaboration" take a healthy jab at the container's history of functionality. The striking "Whispering Jar" by Shaw presents a tree-branch-handle combined with an unusable dish for its teapot spout,

THE SHOWS

■ "Collaboration" and "Christopher Brown: New Paintings" continues at the Byron C. Cohen Gallery, 2020 Baltimore, through Oct. 27. Hours are 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Thursday through Saturday and by appointment. Call (816) 421-5665 for information.

■ "Collaboration" and "Kiel Johnson New Drawings" continue at Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art, 2004 Baltimore, through Oct. 27. Hours are 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Thursday through Saturday and by appointment. Call (816) 221-2626 for information.

while jars in other works threaten to tip; mini-cups are too quirky to drink from, and bottlenecks lack openings.

Sometimes tromp l'oeil treatments receive too much emphasis. In Shaw's "Turtle Tea Pot" and "Lizard Bottle," realistic creatures plopped on top swing the work into the realm of grandmother's-china-cabinet sweet.

Overall, works that manipulate clutter into something shabby-chic make for the most successful complex constructions. Hudson's "Leaf Bottle," for instance, carefully combines chunks of the everyday into a graceful, formal object.

Both galleries paired "Collaboration" with a one-person showing. New paintings by well-known California artist Christopher Brown appear at Cohen, while Sherry Leedy is featuring the supercharged drawings of Kiel Johnson, a 1997 graduate of the University of Kansas who is attending the MFA program at the University of California, Long Beach.

Johnson's large-scale, cartoony charcoal, colored-pencil and acrylic works display a confident, animated line and sparing color, while his unconventional subject matter — including unconscious frogs, lawn chairs, wheelchairs and meandering toilets — keeps the viewer guessing what is next. In a Dr. Seuss-meets-science-fiction world, Johnson injects his inanimate objects with personality and nonsensical connections.

Whether he is depicting a sea of contraptions and gadgets or tangles of electrical wires, pipes or string, Johnson plays with our expectations of mechanical functionality and logical systems.

Like Hudson and Shaw, Johnson turns aspects of the everyday to humorously unexpected ends. His sassy and good-humored works successfully complement the "Collaboration" show and contribute a youthful jolt.