

ARTslant



[Exploding Faces, \[Confining Spaces\]](#)

Steven Frost, Tiphonie Spencer, Nathan Vernau

Robert Bills Contemporary

222 N. Desplaines Street, Under the "L", on Desplaines St., at Lake St., Chicago, IL 60661

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A Matter of Time

by Joel Kuennen

In the realm of the contemporary art gallery, it's common to see uncommon work. This paradigm poses many problems for the critic not to mention the artist, problems that have been brewing for almost a century now. The modern focus on "the new" has churned out mountains of dispensable artifacts along with masterpieces, but fortunately "[Exploding Faces \(Confining Spaces\)](#)" at [Robert Bills Contemporary](#) presents a selection of work that is a quality mix of the contemporary moment; some brashly new, some artfully wrought and some are just there.

There are two stars of this show in my eyes and they are in the very early stages of their careers; Steven Frost and Nathan Vernau, the former a current MFA student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), the latter a recent MFA grad from University of Wisconsin-Madison. Making it a trio is Tiphonie Spencer, a French-American artist who has been active in the wider art world for a decade but is new to Chicago.

Frost and Vernau's work both share a youthful enthusiasm and willingness to develop a personal style and the work ethic to stay with it, a quality rarely found in younger artists. Their work is bright and figural and interestingly enough, both are reacting to the influence of time and its annoying absence from most object-based art that,

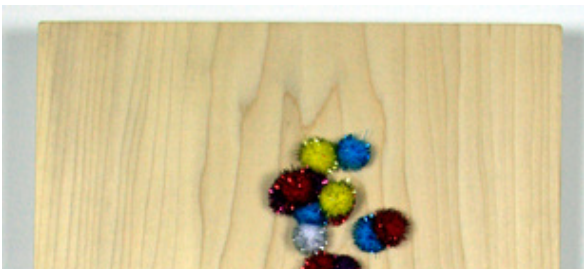
along with most photography, can't help but freeze time in exchange for the creation of aesthetic spaces.



Nathan Vernau. *Lovely*, 2010. Mixed media. Image courtesy of the artist and Robert Bills Contemporary.

Nathan Vernau's work mixes skilled X-Acto knife precision with patterned colored pencil explosions and block letters. Versions of the artist clad in footed pajamas bend, dance, puke, discharge, and rock out on hypercolor sheets of paper, usually in iterations of five or more. Aspects of personality performing and battling are shown multiplying in a static space to depict the realities of what we would call a singular experience.

One of my favorites from Vernau is *Lovely*, 2010, which depicts the artist's replicants stepping from a central fulcrum, socked feet stretching over an abyss as what looks to be an eye bursts open in a teary flood of bodily catharsis. The replicants wear masks in this one; perhaps as the artist may have masked deep disappointment and disenchantment with a former loved one. The word "lovely" stretches above the scene of lost equilibrium in soothing cursive curls that are oh-so lovely. Vernau is someone to watch, his style is unique and communicates the complexities of everyday experience in a way that is just challenging enough.





Steven Frost. Traveler, 2010. Image courtesy of the artist and Robert Bills Contemporary.

Steven Frost is a bit of a mixed bag when set in comparison with the methodical Vernau or the seasoned veteran, Spencer. This contrast of styles and methods strengthened each artist—a result of the keen eye and curatorial sense of the gallery’s director. Frost’s work ranged from a costumed manikin draped in gold lamé to a boxing glove with sequined padding. But his best work, and the majority of his work in this exhibition thankfully, were simple, figurative depictions on wood panels. The figures consisted of various materials, often a fabric with embroidered edging or paper cutouts, pinned like butterflies to the clean, pale-grained wooden panels.

But that wasn’t enough, it needed an element that evoked motion and time – the quintessential companions of contemporary spatial aesthetics. Long hat pins with bobbles of one kind or another dart strategically at the figure and suddenly, the flat figure comes alive – action is implied just enough so that the viewer can project past the gaps of representation.





Tiphonie Spencer. *A day in the life of Africa*, 2004. India ink on Bristol

Tiphonie Spencer's work generally resides within the realms of painting and photography, but at this show, it's all drawings. It took me awhile to warm up to these simple line drawings that reminded me of the kind of drawing I'd do when I'm taking notes or thinking about something else. It's a masturbation of the eye, and Spencer follows the pleasure of looking to spiraling conclusions. What is a drawing when it is not totally figural, yet not abstract, but still not realistic?

Spencer redefines the space of drawing by allowing the drawing itself, the act and the art, to determine the space it exists in. There's a distinct absence of time in Spencer's work represented here. The drawings become static objects, characterizations and generalizations that exist in the vacuum of archive-white paper. The seductive but controlled dark lines make me uncomfortable – too much reduction, not enough gesture to the viewer? I feel left out and even my own finely-honed masturbatory powers of looking cannot bridge the gap. I guess I just like it dirty.

-Joel Kuennen, ArtSlant Staff Writer

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