

Seven Nations • Bill Kirchen
 Kane Welch Kaplin • Scott Blasey
 Scrapomatic • The Clumsy Lovers
 Todd Wolfe • Ernie Hawkins
 Kristi Rose & Fats Kaplin

featuring
The Derek Trucks Band
 Donna the Buffalo
 Grace Potter & the Nocturnals
 Ruthie Foster

Bill Deasy • The NewLanders
 Ben Hardt Acoustic • Joy Ike
 Gypsy Dave & the Stumpjumpers
 Gerry Stanek • The Turpentiners
 Bill Toms • Brad Yoder

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Print

Art

Feeling Gravity's Pull

Invigorating group show explores buoyancy's physics and metaphysics

BY MARTIN L. JOHNSON

Sink/Float | Through Aug. 16 at Area 405



FRANK HAMILTON

Adam Nelson's "Swim."

There are a dozen reasons to see *Sink/Float*, a large and diverse collection of works at Area 405, but just one work--Christian Benefiel's tellingly untitled piece from 2008-2009--captures the show, not just thematically, but also experientially. The piece, the larger of two by Benefiel included in the show, is a large Kevlar and Mylar fabric balloon that is inflated by an air pump and deflates whenever its porous skin contracts in the absence of constant pressure. Fully inflated, the work takes up what would be a full room in a smaller gallery, but even in Area 405's cavernous space, it dominates the second room.

But what makes the work representative of the show as a whole is the motion sensor, visible only to someone looking for it, that controls the air pump. In a crowded gallery, perhaps at an opening, the air pump would steadily run, leaving the balloon fully inflated. When the piece is seen in an empty gallery, however, it is deflated, unable to acquire enough air to even partially inflate.

While not all of the works in *Sink/Float* respond in quite the same way to the show's theme, many of the artists expand the theme beyond its watery connotations to create time-based and site-dependent works that suggest that sinking and floating are metaphors for a broader range of aspirations. In Adam Nelson's "Swim," a dusty life jacket hangs in a dustier metal case, as if it were recovered from a ship that sank in the 1910s. The words outlined in the case--swim--read as a command unheeded, as if the sinking could have been prevented if one only took the jacket.

Other pieces take advantage of the gallery's large floor space and high ceilings to produce works that address questions of scale. Ryan McKibbin's "Sinker" is a large, wooden sculpture that mimics the form of a fishing weight. Like many other pieces in the show, McKibbin's piece challenges the opposition between sinking and floating, suggesting that in many cases it is possible to do both simultaneously.

Ruth Bowler's "untitled (books)," like Benefiel's piece, explores the show's theme in a time-based work that

depends on observers seeing the work at its optimal point. A water fountain made out of books, over time the piece washes away the text, leaving a pulpy mush. While it's not clear if the piece would eventually fall apart, the suggestion that it might explicates the consequences of sinking.

On a similar note, Morgan Showalter's "Float" features a bathtub that you could presumably lie down in to watch a video of a small child floating in the water. Wearing the headphones provided, you hear intense breathing and splashing, signifying not drowning but its imminent possibility.

Drawing on velum paper, Minna Philips creates an imaginary plumbing system in her wall-hung piece "In Case of Emergency," which is at once a detailed and highly inaccurate depiction of actual water works, suggesting an imaginative fear of water emergencies that grows stronger the more one thinks about what lies behind the walls. Likewise, Matt Saindon's photo prints of milk splashes mimic scientific pictures of the perfect milk splash, but he chooses less perfect splashes that mock the dreams of liquid motion.

Elena Volkova works on similar terrain with her photographs of the ocean, in which she washes out all but the faintest suggestion of waves. Several other sculptures in the show--Beki Basch's "Sustainability of Stability," Daniel Sullivan's "Yellow Cake," and Aric Hiser's "Squish"--take on the theme of the show with aplomb, but the ideas of the pieces are inchoate, if not uninteresting. The size of the space and the number of pieces included here allows for some works to get lost in the shuffle, and several works that would stand out in a white-cube gallery, like Ben Lock's "Beached," which features an oval Richard Serra-like sculpture atop a sand pile, and Tanya Synar's "Pangea," an ocean of cast iron, chrome-plated islands, get lost here.

Almost as an afterthought, the show includes another time- and motion-based work by Benefiel, "Hatchet Job," which inflates and deflates in a quiet corner. In this piece, the balloon has a wooden shell, protecting it from shrinking to insignificance in the absence of crowds, and the pump that inflates it is far quieter than that of his other work. When the balloon in the piece shrinks, it does so in its own shell, suggesting that even a shell doesn't prevent one from becoming deflated. It is this fear--not of sinking, but of floating--that the show addresses most pointedly.