

Artist revisits abandoned things in 'Back Again' show

Amanda Sieradzki
Council on Culture & Arts

Artist Christina Klein balanced carefully on the platform of a scissor lift in Topeka, Kansas. Even at a shaky height, she felt an overwhelming sense of community participating in the Brown vs. Board mural that would be proudly displayed in the state capitol. Families and community members came together to paint, as schoolchildren proudly point out the sections that they completed to friends.



Christina Klein

"It's really been eye opening to see what the power of art can do," says Klein. "I think that it really helps inspire the next generation and gives them an extra sense of belonging. It's important to share with each other."

A native of Kansas, Klein says she's always felt compelled to make art, and remarked on how the mural experience truly demonstrated the importance of leading by example. Not typically a large-scale painter, the message at the core of her own work and 3D sculptures emphasize the importance of repurposing abandoned materials.

She finds "beauty in decay" and is inspired by the landscape of forgotten farms in her home state. These ideas come forward in her solo show, Back Again, which can be seen at the Venvi Art Gallery through July 14.

Surrounded by the resources on her family's own farm, Klein was never at a loss for ideas or short on supplies to play with as a child. She remarks that both her parents contributed to her artistry, especially her father who taught her an appreciation for wood. In fact, the majority of her woodworking is still accomplished in her family's dairy barn. However, it was the annual Federal Duck Stamp Contest that transformed her love of doodling into a serious study of painting.

"I always really liked painting and was lucky that my parents were so supportive because they didn't mind me getting paint on the green carpet," laughs Klein. "I got very competitive with the contest and I think that was the main motivator for me to sit down, do something detailed and finish it."

She went on to earn her BFA in painting and sculpting from Kansas State University and spent a year abroad at Justus Liebig University Giessen, Erasmus. Working with professors in Germany gave her a new appreciation for abstract thinking. Many assignments simply involved a prompt and a mystery box of materials that she would then have to shape into a sculpture.

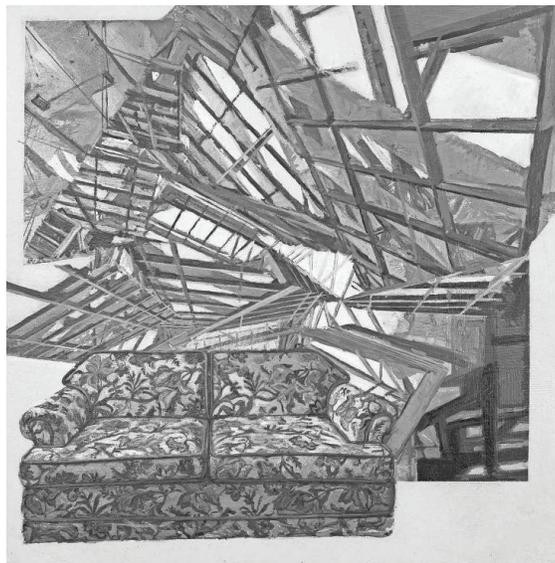
The architecture of German cathedrals especially inspired Klein who drew parallels between them and some of the abandoned farms that dot the Kansas landscape. These connections sparked her interest in taking these barns into the studio somehow, and eventually evolved into her mixed media process.

"I started printing out pictures and collaging them but everything still felt kind of flat to me in the paint," describes Klein. "I thought if I could build these models out of scraps of wood I could recreate them in an abstract sense. For me it's the best of both worlds because the sculpture serves as art itself and it can really interact with the painting, too."

Klein completed her MFA at Florida State University last year, and under the guidance of professor Mark Messersmith, feels she was able to continue this



Christina Klein has a solo show, Back Again, which can be seen at the Venvi Art Gallery through July 14. CHRISTINA KLEIN



Future Daydreams by artist Christina Klein, who has a show at Venvi Gallery. CHRISTINA KLEIN

If you go

What: Back Again

When: 9:30 a.m.-3 p.m., Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and 1-5 p.m. on Saturdays through July 14

Where: Venvi Art Gallery, 21 East Park Avenue #2800

Cost: Free

Contact: For more information please call 850-322-0965 or visit www.venviartgallery.com.

conversation between materials and paint. It's an approach that reconstructs deconstruction, giving the viewer's eyes zigzagging lines and beams to follow which create a unique depth of perception. She uses acrylics in opaque layers, and recently has been drawn to a pink, purple, and manganese blue palette.

For one piece, Klein took photos of a barn and built a model of it in her studio. She then projected colors onto the sculpture to break it up and photographed it again. From there, she painted from the photo of the newly abstracted barn and painted it back into its original field. Even with this distortion of imagery, the canvas and wood surrounding the work harken back to the original setting, with much of her materials sourced from reclaimed wood and fabrics.

"I think a lot of the materials from these places are still usable and I was lucky enough to be able to tear up the floorboards of a house before it was torn down," says Klein. "Every little piece has a story or a history that goes into these paintings."

Even when a painting moves in an unexpected direction, Klein finds satisfaction in hanging it up on the wall to evaluate what it still needs. She especially takes pleasure in sorting out the kinks and small details and will usually bounce between three paintings at any given time.

For the past year she's taught sculpture at Wichita State University and facilitated her students' own self-guided excursions in art. Klein is excited to embark on her own adventure and return to Germany in the fall as a recipient of the Fullbright Fellowship. There, she hopes to continue finding glimpses of her Kansas home in the sunlit European architecture, and recreating them.

Not only will she be "back again" in Germany, but the title of her solo show at Venvi Art Gallery nods to her return to Tallahassee.

It also encapsulates her idea that old materials can become new again. For example, her great-grandparent's orange, floral, velvet couches are central to many paintings in the show. Even though some may see these vestiges of the past as "outdated," Klein's mission is to restore these antiques back to their original states and give them a home again.

"All these homes back in the day were really precious to the people who built them and lived in them but over time they get forgotten," says Klein. "This is my way of elevating these abandoned things and using it in a decorative, interesting way. Some of these homes were really beautiful but now they fall apart in their own beautiful way and you can't recreate them just by rebuilding. To me, even how nature takes its course is poetic."