

Walker's Point gallery The Suburban a place to show and see art without pressure

Rafael Francisco Salas *August 18, 2017*

A decidedly unassuming storefront in Walker's Point houses installations and photographs by the Los Angeles based art couple Elizabeth Bryant and Stephen Berens. It's worth the effort to find it.

The Suburban, an art gallery transplanted from Oak Park, Ill., by owners Michelle Grabner and Brad Killam, has two venues in Milwaukee in Riverwest and Walker's Point. Within these spaces artists exhibit their work in a non-commercial, uncurated setting. In this way the gallery is an extension of the artist's studio. They are given the freedom to install their work as they see fit, unswayed by market forces, the need for reviews from the press (ironically) or in fact by many visitors.

Elizabeth Bryant gleans discarded objects and tactile memories into three totemic, airy assemblages held together with ropes and macramé. They feel as if small, forgotten moments of one's life were tossed into the air and suspended for viewers to see.

Bells, hollowed gourds transformed into lamps, old watches and woven rugs combine in a surprisingly cogent narrative of ephemeral beauty. Ceramic vessels made by students are also tied into these "Hangups," as Bryant refers to them. The lumpy traces of fingerprints and inconsistent decoration on these humble objects evoke the innocence and discovery of making.

One of the assemblages held a Mason jar filled with water, an avocado pit pierced with toothpicks resting on top. The seed had just begun to sprout. This event of transformation, of straight-up magic experienced by so many of us as children, encapsulated the artistic process and the experience of viewing Bryant's work.

The small black-and-white photos of Stephen Berens have a quieter presence in the gallery and are a structured complement to Bryant's overt materiality. Eleven square images are hung unframed on the wall. Taken in South Carolina in the 1970s, they portray roadside gas stations and shops replete with carnivalesque signs for fireworks, beer and souvenirs. Though they at first appear to be candid snapshots with strangely cropped buildings and a somewhat loose focus, as a group they begin to take on a narrative of American journeys.

The photos all were all taken from oblique angles, and this ad-hoc quality echoed the attributes of the hand-painted cartoons of Crazy Bob, Joker Joe and the self-conscious misspellings of these bygone establishments.

The walls and lighting of the space have the white austerity of a contemporary venue, but the floor is a whimsical carryover from the previous owner. A faux terrazzo in green, ochre and brown spreads from wall to wall. I loved it immediately. In this exhibit the floor accented the colorful installations by Bryant, but sapped some of the strength of Berens' black and white prints.

The gallery was once a printing shop. It is situated in the hub of the expanding arts district in Walker's Point, directly across from Brenner Brewery and down the street from other galleries and artist haunts. Though The Suburban sits squarely within this hub of activity, it remains aloof, with no signage, and is open only by appointment.

There is an amount of purity in this endeavor that I appreciate. The artists involved are exhibiting exactly what they want in an environment created for them, without commercial or public pressure. By the same token, access is limited to those in the know, which gives the space a sequestered and somewhat distant stance. If an artwork is created but there is no one there to see it, does it still make a noise?

Elizabeth Bryant's "Three Hangups" and Stephen Berens' "South Carolina, 1974" are on view through Sept. 2 at The Suburban, Walker's Point, 723 S. 5th St. For more information visit [The Suburban](#).



An installation view of the artwork of Elizabeth Bryant and Stephen Berens on view at The Suburban in Walker's Point. (Photo: The Suburban / Walker's Point)