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Spring arrives early in vibrant paintings at Homewood gallery

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JEREMY BORTZ, recent works. Monty Stabler Galleries. Through Jan. 26.

On these often chilly and overcast days of winter, walking into the Monty Stabler Galleries is like a jump into spring. The floral paintings by Jeremy Bortz fill the space with vibrant colors. His paintings have the feel of roadside wild flowers, stretches of small bright blooms that grow in wild.

Bortz applies heavy layers of pigment to the canvas and then scratches fine lines in the paint to create the feeling of resilient stalks. His flowers dot the surface in a heavy impasto that is almost bas-relief in their sculptural feel.

None of the works has frames. Bortz pulls the canvas around the edges of the stretchers and in so doing allows the paintings to achieve a floating quality, a sense of continuum minimally interrupted by the neutral walls of the gallery.

Several works consist of four square canvases mounted to form a larger square, with each canvas containing flowers in contrasting hues. The large paintings have a transitory quality in that they have no particular focal point. They capture a casual, quite natural effect, pleasingly ephemeral to the eye.

Generally speaking, to call works of art decorative is to suggest it serves its purpose by gracing spaces that would otherwise be boring. The decorative works by Jeremy Bortz transcend that limitation by their delightful freshness and charm.

THE ART OF THEATRICAL DESIGN, a faculty group exhibition, the Department of Theatre, UAB. The Visual Arts Gallery, UAB. Through Feb. 2.

This exhibition of costumes, mock-up models of sets and photographs of productions offer some notion of the complexities of theatrical design. For openers I found the presentation far less imaginative than the objects. The exhibition has the feel of a quick pick-up show lacking the usual care given to presentations in this gallery. Part of this results from the limitations of the gallery space, its conformation and the limited and brutal lighting. I suspect the practice of cannibalizing sets and costumes for subsequent productions has taken its toll on availability of pieces as well.

Sets and costumes create the magical world of theatre that gives words and action their heightened intensity. I recall what George S. Kaufmann said when a young author/director claimed no need for such frippery and that the audience would imagine the sets and costumes in the first act. Kaufmann commented, yes, and the actors will have to imagine the audience in the second act.

The scope of theatrical productions done by the UAB theatre department is impressive, giving a wide range of challenges to the designers. Just seeing these small models of stage sets, the period costumes and looking at the production photos is a rewarding experience even in this warehouse style presentation.

What becomes evident is the meticulous care and research that goes into creating the appropriate illusion. In costuming, from Victorian corsets to Edwardian ornamentation, from Oriental kimonos to religious habits and even more recent realizations of dress, the designer must deal with the madness of deadlines and details.

Construction, be it a set or a costume, has to be sturdy and flexible. Sets must convey many moods

and times. Lighting and distance has a lot to do with the success of any production. The basic construction of everything on stage has to serve the play from many angles and convey many moods. The miniature mock-ups on view show the care and ingenuity of the set designer's solutions and the costumes enhance by exaggeration the intent of the production.

As the refrain of the song goes, "Life upon the wicked stage" is never dull, and what it takes to get it all on stage is always exciting.

James R. Nelson is visual arts critic for The Birmingham News.

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