

Jim Drain & Ara Peterson

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Ara Peterson

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The entrance to the Moore Space is a hall filled with a dozen or more bright, spinning pinwheels receding thirty yards to the back. Each is a hermetic color harmony, not guaranteed to match well with its neighbors, though on the whole there is a rhythm. They range from a ponderously revolving twelve-foot mammoth to a hyper-two-footer, all painted in Op patterns. More celebratory than disorienting, these pinwheels are a threshold; their hypnosis is an induction to Jim Drain and Ara Peterson's *Wiggin Village* (2004).

In the main galleries, currents of Op and psychedelia run throughout, but they aren't ends unto themselves; they lend things an edge, a visual excitement that summons our full attention in the course of an image-soaked day. There's a latent ethnicity half-expressed, a colloquial flavor in the air. It's in the vivid color, the interlocking shapes of the wallpaper and the sculptures that allude to another culture, if not another world. It inserts mystery, as though reserved from visitors there is a code at play, one with a deep and foreign history, which, in a sense, is true.

Drain and Peterson come from a collective background. As half of the four-member group Forcefield, they hit the art world hard in the 2002 Whitney Biennial with the installation *Third Annual RoggaBogga*—after which they disbanded. Forcefield called Providence, Rhode Island home; there they were rooted in the tightly knit and ultra-prolific cultural tribe at Fort Thunder. The artists remain informed by that history; in *Wiggin Village*, they lean individual identities against its collaborative spirit.

Drain knits yarn into elaborate patterns that cover his anthropomorphic totems completely. Optically and texturally rich, the body of work really began with drawing comics and making Afghan-inspired costumes for Forcefield's music performances. His sculptural rhetoric has since abstracted from humanoid characters to the increasingly dense formal constructions on view here. Some are vertical, hookah-looking things, but the best are the wild ones. Dressed in ornate knit and beaded costumes, these mushroomy shapes squiggle, squash, and loop themselves haphazardly, ending each appendage in a puffy ball or a silver-beaded tassel. Though sometimes fussy and a little flat, at their best Drain's sculptures swirl virtuoso and vigorous invention into lively moments that give pause to the eye. They're blessedly free of overt reference, but they nonetheless resound with the organic, the primitive, and the discourse of modernist sculpture.

Where Drain's sculptures are soft and dense, Peterson's are clean, hard, and linear. Dispersed amongst *Wiggin Village's* bright color and complexity, his black-and-white bead works stand unashamed of their geometric simplicity, and rightly so. Perhaps they read so confidently because they draw strength from (and echo) the eye-bending animations he projects onto squat platforms on the floor. In these, a reductive black-and-white stripe pattern is submitted to liquefying distortions—layer upon layer creating a video jelly.

Animation feeds sculpture more directly in Peterson's *Standing Wave*, a solid construction like a low fence, perhaps four feet tall and twenty long, comprised of about 300 painted wooden slats. The slats form an abstract shape that rhythmically swells and attenuates from ground to terminus. The shape of each is a slight variation on the one preceding it, so that when put together, oscillations pulsate through the length of the form. The piece is a ten-second animated sequence played out in real space; each segment is an isolated frame.

"There's no wrong note, only a false one," as they say. *Wiggin Village* is in perfect tune, though it rings with the dissonance of growth. Drain and Peterson face a perennial challenge for young artists on the up: how to assimilate values contrary to artworld success into a working career. MFA programs weed undesirable idealists pretty well these days but in the '60s a generation of grungy performance artists not unlike the Fort Thunder crowd took the commercial system to task—and apparently lost. It's no longer relevant to think of creating art as a heroic struggle; our new working model is organic, responsive. Perhaps that's why these two, by tuning their homegrown architectural creativity to the gallery frequency, by polishing their primitivist crafts to museum shine and by rolling their experimentalist values into art's rarified discourses, are adjusting so well.