

Jason Webb creates poetic paintings from piles of discarded objects

BY JEANNE CLAIR VAN RYZIN - SPECIAL AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

We've all seen the occasional piles of curbside detritus before.

In Austin, the piles pop up with some regularity, the result of the city's biannual collection of items too large for regular trash bins. Piles appear on Sundays before a neighborhood's scheduled collection week.

Artist Jason Webb pays close attention to those piles. And the result of that attention is on view in a beguiling series of delicate, intimate paintings on view at Grayduck Gallery through Aug. 25.

For more than a year, Webb methodically sussed out the city's bulk item collection schedule, spending his Sundays driving up and down unfamiliar streets, discovering corners of Austin neighborhoods he never knew, though he was born and raised in nearby Round Rock.

When he spotted a pile that intrigued with its shapes or lines, he photographed it, never disturbing the original arrangement.

Back in his East Austin studio, Webb studiously painted the piles, isolating them against a blank white background and luminously rendering each arrangement in precisely detailed yet very poetic urban still lifes. Webb waters down acrylic paint to create a pigment that is translucent and timeless with a delicate tonality that perfectly captures melancholic details like rust or stains.

"I don't really have any grand political statement about what I'm doing," Webb says on a recent walk through the gallery.

"If anything, it's more anthropological. People put out what they don't have use for, what they don't value any more. And the other people take it away. It's an ecosystem."

Webb has observed that some items re-appear: garden hoses, plastic toys, mattresses, lumber, cheap furniture, sporting equipment. Often, piles seem remarkably well-arranged.

"I started noticing (the piles) just for their visual compositions," Webb says. "I was intrigued by looking at things that are normally overlooked and valueless."

Webb knows he's not alone on his Sunday drives. Scrap pickers cruise the same routes he does, eyeballing him as competition. Homeowners have thrown Webb curious looks; one threatened him with harm. Others have completely ignored the guy with a camera.

Like Webb said, it's all a part of the anthropology of what he's doing.

And though he professes otherwise, Webb's luminous small-scale paintings nevertheless say volumes about the material excesses of our consumer culture and our steady diet of stuff.

In addition to his still lifes of bulk trash piles, Webb has included some larger paintings of a previous series on derelict buildings. Like cruising residential streets to look at the things others don't want to look at, Webb explored abandon urban buildings a few years ago. Again he was drawn to visual qualities of decay — the striking aesthetics of the wear and tear that happens when a building is left to the elements and to vandalism.

Again, though, Webb maintains that the draw to such environments is not a kind of sociological voyeurism. It's about the aesthetics of our impermanent material culture.

"There's so much going on with the surfaces, with all the contrasts they present," he says. "Again, it's really all about looking carefully at something that nobody else is."

Webb's exhibit at Grayduck is actually the result of winning the "Eyes Got It" event, staged during last year's East Austin Studio Tour. A riff on creative competition reality television shows, "Eyes" is live, with a panel of local art experts critiquing while artists respond. For the past couple of years, the "Eyes" winner has been awarded a solo show at Grayduck.

Recently, Webb has started painting people's personal collections — the treasured gatherings of often random things like salt and pepper shakers, vintage 1970s jewelry or kachina dolls. And yes for Webb, the collections are about looking — and looking carefully.

Four of the collection paintings are included in the current exhibition, offering an interesting coda to Webb's trash pile paintings.

"With the collections, I'm discovering what objects have intense personal value for people — what things have the most meaning for them even if those things don't have meaning for anyone else," he says.

"Bulk Collection"

When: 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, noon to 5 p.m. Sundays through Aug. 25

Where: Grayduck Gallery, 608 W. Monroe St.

Tickets: Free

Information: 512-826-5334, www.grayduckgallery.com What things, in other words, that are least likely to end up in a curbside heap.



"Discard Pile 22," one of Jason Webb's delicate, intimate paintings of curbside trash piles.



Jason Webb's "Discard Pile 28," part of the artist's solo exhibit at Grayduck Gallery through Aug. 25.



Jason Webb's "Discard Pile 29"