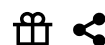




## OPINION



## Art: 'Urbanism' focuses on renewal and decay in cities

An exhibition titled "Urbanism" might suggest vignettes of city life - the street scenes, storefronts, advertising signs, and crowds of pedestrians that create the daily panorama of a metropolis like Philadelphia.



'California Ten,' a work by Ben Peterson in ink and graphite on paper that is part of PAFA's 'Urbanism' exhibition. Everything is in flux, even the Earth itself, which cracks and vaults to cr... [Read more](#)

by By Edward J. Sozanski, Contributing Art Critic | Columnist, Inquirer  
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An exhibition titled "Urbanism" might suggest vignettes of city life - the street scenes, storefronts, advertising signs, and crowds of pedestrians that create the daily panorama of a metropolis like Philadelphia.

Yet city life as a source of narrative doesn't concern the five artists curator Julien Robson of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts chose for this show. Instead, they are engaged in evoking the energy, both constructive and destructive, and the visual details and subliminal textures of the modern city.

These are features one might notice peripherally while walking or driving the streets, things such as construction barriers, abandoned buildings, demolitions in progress, and the ubiquitous Dumpsters.

The art in this show, which occupies the largest gallery in the Academy's Hamilton

Building, draws its energy from the constant current of renewal and decay of a dynamic urban culture.

The artists remind us how this happens through various media. Arden Bendler Browning is a painter, Ben Peterson makes large-scale colored drawings, Amy Walsh creates installations, and brothers Steven and Billy Dufala are represented by works in two and three dimensions.

The Dufalas, who won the West Collection's grand prize in 2009, might be the best known of the bunch locally, mainly because their entry in the West competition attracted considerable attention: It was an ice cream truck that they modified to resemble an armored personnel carrier by mounting a small cannon on the front.

They created something similar in spirit for "Urbanism" by lining a standard 20-cubic-yard Dumpster with tufted padding, thus converting it into an open coffin. Whatever metaphoric spin you choose to apply is as good as any other, as long as it refers to urban decay.

The same holds for a sprawling wall sculpture, the word *Entropy* spelled out in eight parallel lines of bent electrical conduit. A lot of work went into this piece, and one must admire both the energy and the skill that brought it off (metal conduit doesn't bend easily). But ultimately *Entropy*, like the Dumpster coffin and the armored ice-cream truck, is a one-off. Message delivered, no further thought required.

A site-specific wall drawing titled *Heap* is a more complex and provocative animal. It rises to within a few feet of the ceiling, a densely packed mound of industrial detritus that includes belts, pulleys, and various electrical components. Again, considerable

craft and imagination are involved. The mound at first looks like a chaotic tangle, but each element is precisely drawn, and the repetition of forms suggests that this pile is an organic whole that, perversely, is full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

One can read *Heap* as a refutation of the marketing-driven consumer culture that inevitably produces endless piles of dysfunctional junk. It is, at least, a seductive work that holds one's attention far longer than a one-liner such as the Dumpster coffin.

Amy Walsh, who, like the Dufalas, teaches at the Academy, has created a three-section installation that occupies one side of the cavernous first-floor gallery.

Each section is built of provisional walls made of wooden studs covered with translucent plastic and sheets of cardboard - the kind of partitions common in interior renovation projects. At intervals, Walsh has cut five peepholes; behind each is a miniature interior that evokes abandonment and desuetude - broken windows, skeletal walls, dim light from naked bulbs, and absence of any furnishings or evidence of human activity.

Much of Philadelphia looks like this, although because the disintegration is often hidden and spread over a large area one doesn't think about it. Here one can ponder the fragility of the urban fabric at close range; unfortunately, the dollhouse scale makes the tableaux seem charming instead of disturbing.

Arden Bendler Browning and Ben Peterson adopt a relatively more positive stance toward the dichotomy of urban transformation.

Browning's large, un-stretched paintings in Flashe (a vinyl paint) and acrylic gouache are made on the ubiquitous construction fabric called Tyvek, which is pinned directly to the walls. They are heavily abstracted in that a few recognizable objects such as chunks of buildings and highway overpasses usually occur in each of her four paintings.

The dominant characteristic, however, is not motifs but dynamic motion and swirling energy, as if we were looking at the consequences of a passing tornado in stop-motion. Browning is showing us urban environments in transition, although it isn't possible to determine which way they're moving, toward entropy or coherence.

In that sense, Browning is able to suggest both aspects of urban transformation simultaneously. And she does so with images that, through their intense color and forceful currents, are both attractive and exciting.

By contrast, Ben Peterson's ink-and-graphite drawings are not only quieter, they're almost static. Yet they're equally compelling for exactly that reason.

Peterson draws in the meticulous, intensely detailed style of an architectural draftsman, but his conceptual framework is closer to magic realism. His evocation of urban existence is perhaps the most imaginative and optimistic section of the exhibition, yet it's also the one that requires the most intense scrutiny.

Each composition is an architectural fantasy whose elements suggest both the continual displacement involved in navigating cities and the fascinating juxtapositions that displacements generate.

For instance, luggage, emblematic of transience, is ubiquitous, particularly in *Baggage Claim* and *Gung Ho*, both of which feature a plethora of suitcases. In *City on a Hill*, a falling tree crushes a house resting on two towers of scaffolding, while an inverted image of the house clings to the underside of the platform.

Peterson's most ambitious drawing is *Ship's Wake*, in which a building, propped up by poles as if in dry dock, is imagined as a ship complete with "lifeboats" filled with foliage.

A profusion of scaffolding and orange construction netting symbolizes the constant transmutation of the cityscape. Everything is in flux, even, in *California Ten*, the Earth itself, which cracks and vaults to create a makeshift shelter.

Peterson's drawings are the cherry atop the sundae; by themselves they affirm the thesis of "Urbanism," a far more substantial exercise than one expects from a summer exhibition.

### **Art: Spirit of the City**

"Urbanism" continues in the Hamilton Building of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Broad and Cherry Streets, through Sept. 4. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays and 11 to 5 Sundays. Admission is \$15 general and \$12 for visitors 60 and older, students with ID, and visitors 13 to 18. 215-972-7600 or [www.pafa.org](http://www.pafa.org).

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