

ARTSEEN

TAMARA ZAHAYKEVICH *Hey Harmonica!*

by Linnea Kniaz

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It is Tamara Zahaykevich's admirable abandonment of order that controls *Hey Harmonica!*, the artist's first solo show at the recently opened KANSAS Gallery. The sinuous space contains the artist's 12 humbly scaled, wall-mounted or free-standing sculptures made predominantly of paper-related materials and foam core. Without a hierarchy or progression of work to coordinate it, I was pulled from one construction to another by the steady pulse of their erratic paint marks, glue splotches, patterns, and contours. Such playful incongruity at times hinders the works' clarity, but it also conveys the artist's unwavering and magnetic formal curiosity.



Lazy I, 2011. Foam board, Polystyrene, paper and acrylic paint. 17 × 11 1/4 × 2 1/2".

Zahaykevich strikes the balance between control and freedom that artists so often struggle to attain. The exclusive use of low-end or discarded paper, foam core, and Styrofoam scraps—made more vulnerable by aging in her studio before use—deviates from her otherwise flexible practice, and allows her to play uninhibitedly with shape, color, and pattern without fearing that her actions may nullify the work. She aggressively transforms the accessible and malleable debris unearthed from her studio or street into compact, self-contained structures with addressed surface. Ranging from about 4 to just 23 inches in dimension, the voluminous and unusually proportioned, angular, or biomorphic works are composed of flat planes. These facets—sometimes printed on or blemished—bear all over checkered, splattered, spray-painted patterns, brushstrokes, and dots that transgress each plane's scored or cut edges. There are a variety of schemas from multicolored stripes to paint globs or solid colors on each geometric face. Although the sculptures' feathers, glitter, bright colors, and oozing glue encompass a charmingly blithe sensibility, their diminutive size, attractive coloring, and intricate facets that refract light and radiate color evoke precious stones, or more accurately, Ring Pops. One hardly suspects the rudimentary scale models from which the artist's practice derives, and certainly not the waste from which the works are made.

Influenced by her late Ukrainian grandmother's resourcefulness, Zahaykevich aims to bewitchingly transform the unassuming materials. Though she occasionally preserves coarse edges, soiled surfaces, and irregular forms that intimate a history, pristine works such as "Pastel Habit" (2011), with rectangular planes carefully painted and cleanly attached to one another to form a beehive-like structure, struggle to communicate the artist's thrifty principles. Her monochromatic constructions from the early 2000s, though formally complicated by minute foam core ridges, more clearly express her economical intentions by hinting at the material's origins through their minimal color and maintained scruffiness.

Despite an imprudently drastic alteration of the materials that impedes clarity, her spontaneous formal play with depth, gesture, and shape suggests an acutely considered vision within her inexhaustible practice. Even after learning about her conservation of scraps in the show's press release, I did not sense any intrusion of cultural references, including those to the current economic crisis. Rather, by repeatedly working with certain materials, Zahaykevich handles form with determined ingenuity, and formal abstraction takes precedent. Reacting to materials rather than following a predetermined process, Zahaykevich renders the quirky forms that share common visual motifs, yet offer distinct perspectives. For example, she illustrates depth either literally with the constructed forms or illusionistically with a painted gradient shift on a flat foam core plane in "Leftovas" (2011). Analogous gestures also vary in effect. Neon-colored blotches and streaks, softly painted clouds, and meditative hash marks may simultaneously appear in one work, demonstrating a

free associative approach to painting. Marks, on the other hand, can also seem either self-referential, as in “Lazy I” (2011) where two black splotches mimic and accentuate two adjacent glue marks, or contrived, as when a green blotch on “Leftovas” draws attention to the foam core steps protruding from its side.



Eee, 2011. Polystyrene foam, paper, acrylic paint, and ink. 13 1/2 × 6 3/4 × 6 1/4".

While demonstrating versatility in solutions, the reserved congruency between the works' surfaces also challenged my ability to draw comparisons that could offer insight. Although Zahaykevich thoroughly investigates construction with flat planes, the medley of patterned surfaces that only loosely relate to one another can imply frivolous decoration, not investment in the gestures, colors, or materials used. Mostly, however, Zahaykevich seems to approach surfaces in response to the body created. Her assertive painting enables the unification of skin and body so that they communicate with and enhance one another. The elegant black and gold rectangles that coat the venerable “Eee”(2011), for instance, accentuate its figure's imperious elongation and steady horizontal planes. To coordinate surface and form, she sometimes sacrifices spontaneity—and possibly raw imperfection—for the clarity, precision, and confidence provided by a computer. And while I was at first disenchanted to read this in the press release, I came to recognize that Zahaykevich's openness

to alternative processes, and one that perceptively embraces the influence of present time, further asserts her ferocious flexibility.

By organically rearing her sculptures with such delicately moderated denial of boundaries, it seems that the artist's constructions, with confounding effervescence and individuality, disprove the exhibition title's assumption. Rather than convert, as a harmonica does with air to make sound, Zahaykevich *animates*.