BUILDING ON THE PAST

Four artists examine ideas and works from their predecessors through a modern lens.

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Artists do not work in a vacuum. Whether they focus on it or not, they create work within the context of art history, continuing a centuries-long narrative of art production, from cave paintings to present-day performance art.

Too often, contemporary artists seem less than cognizant of their place within this history. However, the four artists exhibiting in the "Remasters" exhibit at Plug Projects not only acknowledge their artistic forebears, they also create a visual and conceptual dialogue by emulating or poking fun at them.

Joshua Bienko, Erin O'Keefe, Keer Tanchak and Travis Shaffer unabashedly borrow images and concepts from the pages of art history textbooks and contemporary art magazines and modify them with their own ideas and aesthetic sensibilities.

This is smart and engaging work by artists who acknowledge the impossibility of originality in the 21st century, and their work is stronger for it. The show is a feather in the cap for the artist-run Plug Projects.

Take, for instance, New York-based O'Keefe's series of photographs of colored squares nested inside each other. O'Keefe made these images while thinking about Josef Albers' "Homage to the Square," a body of work Albers completed over 25 years featuring overlapping squares of color on a flat surface.

Albers, a color-theorist, conducted experiments on the effects of adjacent colors, creating illusions of receding or advancing space. (Visit the Nelson-Atkins Museum to see one of Albers' square paintings.)

Like Albers, O'Keefe explores color relationships, but she builds painted boxes and photographs them, adding a third dimension to Albers' idea. The results are a series of photographs where there's more than meets the eye.

As in Albers' paintings, richly colored squares overlap, but O'Keefe's work has an atmospheric effect. In "Aqua Grey
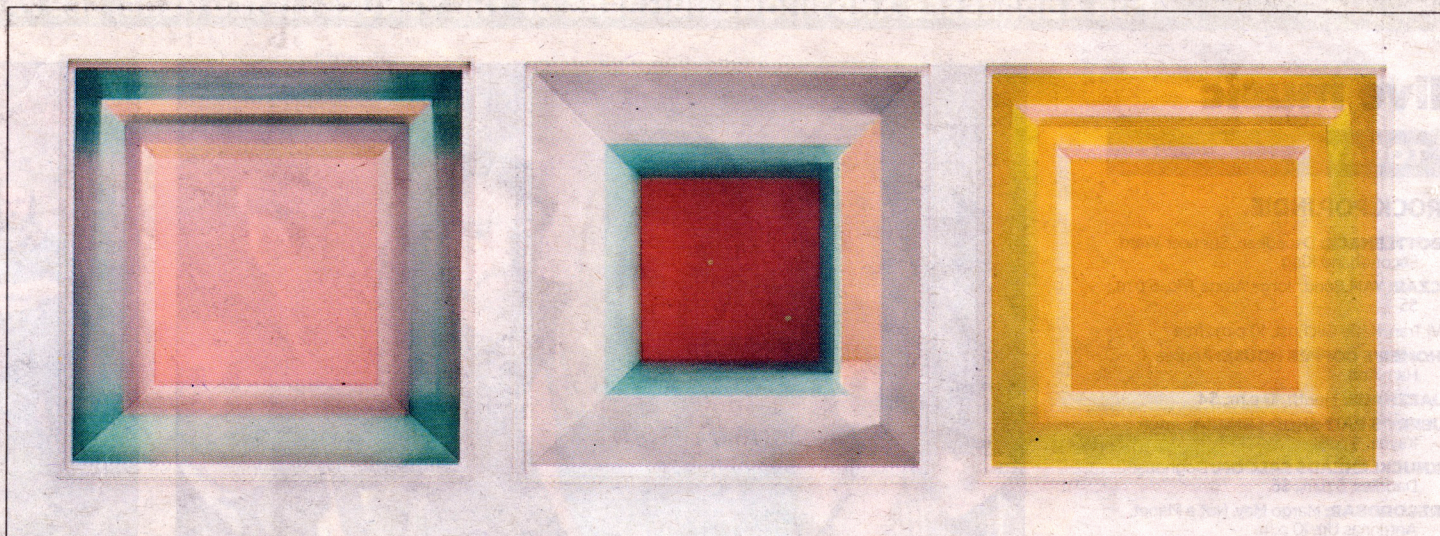
PHOTOS FROM THE ARTISTS

The "Remasters" exhibit at Plug Projects includes Erin O'Keefe's archival injet prints inspired by the concentric colored rectangles of modernist Josef Albers' "Homage to the Square" series.

In "kOde"(2011), Chicago-based artist Keer Tanchak recycles visual fragments from paintings by French Rococo artists.

Pink God Light" (2011), the peachy pink of the background bleeds into grays and aqua blues produced as light enters the three-dimensional form through openings in the top.

Chicago-based painter Keer Tanchak reaches even further back into art history by recycling visual fragments from lavish paintings by French Rococo artists, repurposing them to create fresh meaning.

Tanchak paints faces drawn from a mental library of works she admires in thin, sketchy brushstrokes on irregular-shaped sheets of aluminum. In "kOde" (2011), Tanchak paints the delicate face of a woman in a high-neck collar in three palettes on separate sheets.

By re-presenting these

18th-century symbols of pleasure and wealth in contemporary American society, Tanchak gives viewers a chance to reflect on how attitudes toward privilege and its role in the arts may or may not have changed.

Travis Shaffer, a visiting assistant professor at the University of Kansas, openly rips off the ideas and aesthetics of Los Angeles-based artist Ed Ruscha. He uses a tool that facilitates appropriation: the Internet. To create "Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles ... via Google Maps" (2008), Shaffer did exactly what his title suggests — he copied the satellite images of parking lots in Los Angeles and arranged them in book format.

In 1967, Ruscha published a book featuring aerial photo-

graphs of the same lots, with the images shot by Art Alanis.

Ruscha was a pioneer of conceptual art, a movement in which the idea was considered the most important element of the work. He helped question the notion of authorship: Ruscha didn't shoot the photos that make up "Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles," but it was still his book.

Shaffer continues this investigation in the digital age: Not only were the photographs in his book generated by someone else, but he got the idea from Ruscha. Examining attitudes toward originality and authorship is even more important in an era when appropriation is as easy as pressing Control-C.

Texas artist Joshua Bienko borrows from other visual artists and from pop culture. In his hilarious music videos, the artist raps about art world celebrities and his own prowess as a visual artist, appearing in front of a background dotted with what

appear to be luxury brand logos. He intersperses clips from movies, video games and performance art.

With all the namedropping — Bienko mentions artists including Tehcing Hsieh and Matthew Barney — the raps could come across as inside jokes for members of the art world. But Bienko has something for everyone; his rhymes reference tennis star Andy Roddick and "Star Trek: The Next Generation" character Jean-Luc Picard.

Bienko adds another layer of meaning to his video "Rappin Bout Art" by inserting clips from music videos by Milli Vanilli. The pop duo caused a controversy in the late 1980s when the news broke that the voices on the album were not those of the two men on the album art and in the videos.

It makes sense that Bienko would select scenes from "Girl I'm Gonna Miss You," where one of the members of Milli Vanilli plays an artist in love with a gallerist. By including a performance by a fake musician impersonating a visual artist, Bienko sends a sly wink to his viewers. What really is authentic here? And does it really matter?

The four artists in "Remasters" make complex and visually engaging work. Those who cannot remember the past may be destined to repeat it, but these artists demonstrate that both remembering and repeating the past make for good art.