OU art museum stretches the visual vocabulary
Skoglund, Gottlieb shows bring unusual art to Norman

BY LISA SMITH

Dozens of neon red goldfish escaped from their bowls, making their home in a child's electric blue bedroom. Colored on the bed, suspended in the air and circling wildly through the room, the goldfish have the distinct impression that they may very soon wreak vengeance on the well suited and dainty children who crawl about the room. Grinning like a vision of a sunshine-yellow, polyester-clad kis, dotted liberally and unluckily with raisins, the sculpture leaves onlookers speechless and mystified. Why — and how — anyone could possibly get more than their share of entertainment from this monochrome than rhinestones on Liberace's left sleeve has left them dazed. Aned by the magnitude of such an undertaking, their jaws drop — and their masses wax.

Elsewhere, a slate of pale, light green cats saunter through a grey teepee-tent apartment, providing the only glimmer of color, and possibly hope, in the so-called "golden years" of two senior citizens backlit by the glow of a half-speed refrigerator door. Possibly seated in the metaphorical "Meat Market," literally in front of a backdrop of gleaming ground round, sits what could be called the "Reef Babe," whose scantly pale green frock and hand-woven wigs are the sole adornments to a physique solely made of hamburger, known to New York artist Sandy Skoglund as "Spirituality in the Pines." When viewing Skoglund's work, it is difficult to tell whether you are asleep or awake, having a dream or living a nightmare — and whether the images are fact or fantasy.

"These are really unusual pieces," said Jan Deighton, assistant director/curator, surveying an amalgamation of pink squids, purple babies and green cats.

"They kind of give you the sense of reality, but they are also based in surrealism," Deighton said.

"They are kind of a cross between a dream and a nightmare." Described as frolicsome and insightful, with comments from New York critics saying Skoglund's work is "a frozen slice of unchecked imagination," that "evokes adult foam in a playful, childlike context," Skoglund's works will be coming from the University of Oklahoma at the next week.

Pushy photographs, neon sculpture and three-dimensional, walk-through installations will fill the Fred Jones Jr. Memorial Art Center at OU where they will make their debut Sunday, Sept. 27 for the exhibition, "In the Last Hour: Sandy Skoglund: Photographs/Sculpture 1979-1992." In addition to dozens of large Chasenlee photography of the bizarre world that Skoglund creates before capturing them on film, the museum will feature one 3-D installation, "The Green House," which was most recently featured in Aspen, Colo. galleries. Emerald green astro turf covers every bit of modern Yuppiepied in Skoglund's installation, which consists of a green living room, overrun with purple and green dogs while middle-class folk sit in their den, obnoxious.

According to museum director Tom Torperzer, the Skoglund exhibition is in the museum's largest now being featured with the latest, most cutting-edge contemporary art.

"What we would like to do through the exhibition is expose people to art that they would not necessarily see in this part of the country," Torperzer said.

"We would like to stretch their horizons and their visual vocabulary a little bit, in terms of what is happening in the contemporary art world."

Impact is what he would most like and expect the works to have on unsuspecting audiences.

"The colors have impact in and of themselves," said Torperzer.

"It's as if the planet's color controls have been tampered with, and the creatures and objects are precisely where they shouldn't be. The sheer visual impact is enough. These are the sort of things you see from across the room.

In addition to the vibrancy and site of the photographs — and the lifestyle, walk-through installation — site of the main attractions, or mysteries, of Skoglund's work is deciphering the mayhem and the meaning of her work.

"Her work is very theatrical," Torperzer said.

"There is a meaning there, and there is a story being told," he said.

"You have to decide whether it's a dream or a nightmare."

In addition to the Skoglund exhibition, the museum will feature two off-beat, off-shoot art shows beginning Sept. 27.

The museum's galleries will feature the abstract expressionist painter Adolph Gottlieb and World War II posters crafted by prominent illustrators of the Forties including Norman Rockwell.

Gottlieb is famous for hieroglyphic, primitive-looking photography that he created during the Forties and abstract paintings called bursts, which he designed during the mid-Fifties.

The exhibition, "Pictures into Bursts: Adolph Gottlieb: Paintings in Transition," chronicle the evolution of Gottlieb's early works, which look like African folk symbols, to his abstract renditions of the Southwestern landscape, which are characterized by large circular suns, wide expanses of emptiness and chaotic masses near the bottom of the canvas. The panoply of Gottlieb's work provides a glimpse at picturegrams, imaginary landscapes, "unlit life," labyrinths and bursts.

All of the why's and wherefores of these famous but perhaps unknown artistic phenomena will be explained to those who may wish to hear informal gallery talks on the finer points of modern art. Lectures on the beginnings of modernism will be offered Oct. 8. A gallery talk on abstract expressionism will be featured Oct. 15, and a discussion of post-modernism will be offered Oct. 22.

For those with a taste for the blatant rather than the oblique, the museum will also display "World War II Posters: The Art of Propaganda."

The visual subtleties of the times include a one-eyed puppy sitting on a folded uniform with the inscription "Because Somebody Talked," a Mad plugging a blade through the Holy Bible above the words "This is The Enemy," and a swab of foam washing a dead soldier to shore above the emblazoned slogan: "A Careless Word...A Needless Life."

In addition to the warnings came solicitations ranging from war bonds to bacon grease, which could be transformed into explosives. While the posters serve as a reminder of times past, the busy, pasted images remain as a testimony to the illustrative achievements of Norman Rockwell, Ben Shahn, Joseph Hirsh and Anton Otto Facher.

The Fred Jones Jr. Memorial Art Center is open Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; Thursdays from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.; Sundays from 1 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.; and Saturdays from 1 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. During home football games on select Saturdays, the museum is open from 10 a.m. until kickoff. For more information, call 325-3272.