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Humor and absurdity, as luck would have it

Young artist's show is a roll of the dice

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Is creativity underwritten by odds any better than online poker? Jacques Louis Vidal's show "I Make My Own Luck," at South Boston's LaMontagne Gallery, makes you wonder. In the process, it crystallizes feelings of aimlessness, if not panic, at large among artists today.

It's a hectic, sloppy, and yet consistently impressive show, full of black humor, hard-hearted obsession, brazen absurdity, and occasional outbreaks of virtuosity. What it lacks, pointedly, is a sense of larger purpose. Rather than an expression of creative conviction, the whole enterprise feels like a mirthful roll of the dice.

Indeed, as the title suggests, luck and superstition are themes at the brittle heart of Vidal's work here. The show includes drawings in Bic pen, various sculptural assemblages, and a set of collages made by cutting up printouts of images on the Web, then layering them in patterns that resemble a three-dimensional contour model against a blank ground.

Adding to the carnival atmosphere, Vidal, who is 27, has divided the gallery into small, jagged spaces with a zigzagging screen. It appears to be made from upturned wooden pallets joined by hinges and painted in loud colors. It's called "Klown Wall #1."

Each part of the wall has a piece, or pieces, attached. One, called "Windows Fossil," is an online gambling site, replete with pop-up windows, that Vidal has translated into the medium of clay. The result is memorably pathetic - a ludicrously doomed attempt to bestow permanency and solidity on high-speed, touch-responsive, prepackaged desires.

Another work, "Fingers Crossed," is a wooden arm bent at the elbow, lathed to create an accordion-like appearance, with two fingers crossed for good luck. Looking into

a funhouse distorting mirror beside it, you find your head and torso exchanged for a second set of legs.

If the piece has an internal logic, it eluded me. But standing before it, my gut flipped with an apprehension of futility, and I laughed.

The collages are something else. The best of them is called "Swamp Ting" (it's the only one created using photos Vidal took himself). Via a process of cutting and layering, the artist has created the image of a thick, twisting tree trunk. The heads of snarling animals emerge on one side, while a tire swings on a rope from the other. The colors are intense and kaleidoscopic up close, but resolve into rich greens, purples, and browns at a distance.

All the other collages employ images printed from the Web. These relate, I was told, to particular themes, although the subject of the source photographs seems neither here nor there: Once they have been cut up and layered, the imagery ceases to be recognizable.

Any suggestion of technical fussiness in the collage works is dispelled by pieces like "Hakuna Matata" (the title comes from a song in "The Lion King"). This fantastic scarecrow of a sculpture is made from tar, pipe, rope, jewels, feathers, hair, steel, concrete, and glass. With its two feet standing in concrete-filled buckets, it feels about as raw and uningratiating as sculpture can get.

Elsewhere in this crowded show, a series of drawings in pen and watercolor features recognizable, cartoonish images ("Anger-Mouse," for instance, riffs on Mickey Mouse's head) or abstract, grid-based patterns. Framed behind glass, the drawings are all, I was told, two-sided, so that the abstract images have figurative images on the flipside and the figurative images are backed by abstract patterns.



Jacques Louis Vidal's "Swamp Ting" is a collage made of photos that have been cut and layered.

As with so much else in the show, the conceit strikes me as perverse before it suggests anything else (playing cards, perhaps?). But never mind: Both kinds of drawing look good.

My favorite work in the show, "Bad Luck Chuck," is an installation of four IKEA shelves, alternating black and white, protruding from the wall like a Donald Judd sculpture. It veers sharply away from Judd's minimalism, however, because random garish objects have been arranged on each shelf in the manner of a cabinet of curiosities: a clown head on its side; a spherical, smoothly sanded piece of timber with two knots in the grain suggesting eyes; a three-dimensional wooden model of the hearts motif from a deck of cards, and so on. Tucked under the lowest shelf is a small clear box with a dead mouse and a toy alligator.

These strange, arbitrary-seeming objects arranged just so suggested to me an array of lucky charms - powerful objects on which superstitious beliefs pivot. Which makes them pretty much indistinguishable from art.