

Artist's perfection is in imperfections

By JAMES AUER

Journal Sentinel art critic

This Christopher McNulty must be quite a guy.

Most artists construct images of themselves that are as perfect as they can make them, with flawlessly straight lines, idealized curves and luscious colors. They strongly imply that perfection is not only achievable but, in these cases, already achieved.

To judge by the evidence available to us, McNulty is a very different kind of animal.

He builds his sculptures to underscore his fallibility and mortality — “to highlight,” he says, “the tension that exists between the ideal that I seek and the reality of my own life.”

Nine of his self-effacing creations, fashioned out of wood, metal, graphite on paper and, sometimes, paint, linger through Dec. 1 at the Dean Jensen Gallery, 759 N. Water St.

McNulty has titled this particular show “Elusion” — perhaps to point up the fact that illusion persists in eluding him.

Nowhere is McNulty's engaging lack of pretense more evident than in the graphite on paper work “Map.” Whereas an acclaimed master of minimalism such as Agnes Martin might have spent months achieving a reason-

able approximation of precision, McNulty willingly shows work that reveals his failings.

The draftsmanship is just slightly wiggly, the spacing off. The idea is fine as far as it goes, but the process — the actual laying down of lines, freehand, on paper — is undercut by McNulty's essential humanity.

“Replication,” a wood-and-paint concoction, reflects McNulty's efforts to use each completed stick as a template for the carving of the next. Inevitably, it goes terribly awry, much like a rumor that speeds from ear to ear to ear across the community and ends up horribly distorted.

“Impotent I” is a particular enigma. It consists of a row of nails, firmly implanted in a wall-mounted plank. All of the nails are proudly erect. Not a single one is even at an angle. What's it all about?

In an interview, McNulty suggested that even here the quest for perfection is sabotaged by minor irregularities that are invisible from a distance but evident on close inspection. Thus, the subject of the sculpture isn't impotency, but a demonstrable lack of quality control.

Throughout the show, McNulty confects subtle portraits of himself as a dweebish non-hero.

IF YOU GO

Milwaukee
Journal Sentinel
Nov. 7, 2001

What: “Elusion” — sculpture and drawings by Christopher McNulty

Where: Dean Jensen Gallery, 759 N. Water St.

How long: Through Dec. 1

Hours: 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday.

Admission: Free. For information, call (414) 278-7100.

“Measure VI” is exactly his height: 68 inches. “1+1” presents us with a list of numbers, each doubled from the last, inscribed in exponential fashion on a roll of computer receipt paper.

Through it all, the show seems to be saying: This McNulty fellow is one of us, not some finicky flake who is spending his life out there somewhere, crafting flawless gems of unalloyed genius.

Even his materials — roughly sawed planks, bundles of crudely angled sticks, crinkly pieces of paper — have the common, rather than the aesthetic, touch.

The end result is an unexpected, but welcome, object lesson in simplicity, humility and tolerance for our terrified — and terribly self-involved — era.