

Make no mistake, there's a message here

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These are serious times, and we're all supposed to be thinking about serious things. But we're not. Not all the time, anyway. There is only so much Aaron Brown a human being can take.

I headed up to Lincoln Park's funky 1926 Exhibitions Studies Space, the gallery where the Art Institute of Chicago puts on its wilder, more avant-garde shows, because I was looking for a laugh. Or at least a high-minded, elitist kind of snicker.

The theme of its new exhibition is "Oops! ... I did it again." As in the Britney Spears song and album. I figured it would be ironic and cynical and funny as hell. It's not.

"It took people a while to understand how seriously I take this," says Ryan Weber, the 25-year-old Wicker Park artist responsible for organizing the exhibition. "I wasn't interested in just making fun of Britney. That would be too easy."

Each of the 15 artists participating in the show, opening tonight, was invited, Weber explains, "to create a new work reflecting his or her own interpretation and response to Britney Spears' song and album title as it relates to categories such as love, repetition and failure."

Did I mention he was totally serious?

As we walk through the gallery at 1926 N. Halsted, Weber, who is of slight build and blushes easily, stops at each exhibit to explain its connection to Britney. There's Gabriel Fowler's video piece, a hypnotic spiral that spins and spins as audio clips from movie scenes--mostly people getting hypnotized--play in the background.

"It's a nice juxtaposition between high and low culture," Weber says, just in case that isn't already perfectly obvious.

Martin Esteves is on a stepladder in the gallery's front window, putting the finishing touches on his submission. There's a tree just outside the window, centered perfectly in its frame. Esteves is painting its image there and in the window on the other side of the front door as well. His page in the show's hot-pink catalog explains its relevance: "A tree on the sidewalk can act as a natural facility for implementation, especially if one already has a window set up for its study ground anyway. Paint it once. Paint it again. Maybe we'll learn something. Maybe not."

The "Oops!" is implied but unspoken, the way deeper meanings tend to be--especially when scantily-clad pop princesses are involved.

Adam Sipe's painting is even harder to figure out.

"I think it's supposed to be about him dying and Britney dying," Weber says, sounding a little unsure.

Checking the explanatory catalog again, I see he's absolutely right. "The piece for 'Oops' is called 'Though I Be a Young Man My Body Does Decay,'" Sipe writes. "It's about Britney Spears as sexy dying psychedelic clown. Oops, she's doing it too, dying along with the countless other pop stars we've loved."

Near Sipe's work, along the same wall, hangs an abstract painting by Stacie Johnson. Because I think I am starting to catch on to the idea of "Oops," I immediately take note of the pink spaces that seem to

pop out from the painting's geometric design. That suddenly seems very Britney, in a serious artist sort of way, like a comment on culturally manufactured femininity.

I am deeply impressed by my interpretation and jot it down in my notebook. Unfortunately, I haven't quite gotten it.

"The critique about abstraction," Weber is saying, "is that it's just pure aesthetics, without intellectual content. You hear the same criticism about popular culture."

There is a part of me--the part that is about to turn 30, I suppose--that wants to tell Weber to get over it. It's just a pop song and not even a particularly good one. But there is another part of my mind that won't just write this off. In a very odd, and frustratingly earnest, way, Weber is on to something. Somehow, the stuff that we all laugh at as empty--pop music, bad TV--is the very stuff that defines who we are.

There is something deeply American about the whole idea of "Oops!"--that pose that says we know a lot more than we usually let on. That we are, in fact, not that innocent. We repeat our mistakes and pretend not to know any better. We embrace symbols--like the flag--but ignore what they actually symbolize, like freedom of speech.

It's the political equivalent of dancing around in clothes that are barely there and then getting mad when somebody accuses us of acting like sluts.

It's our whole approach to the world lately: We're all about freedom and justice and, hey, if we happen to get control of some oil fields in the process of promoting democracy, well, so much the better. Call it the Britney doctrine. Imperialism? Oops, we're doing it again.

I went to see Weber's show hoping to escape all the stuff that's been on my mind lately. It didn't work.

I wanted to not write about the war, to laugh about something else and just forget it for a while.

Oops.

"Oops! . . . I did it again" is open tonight through April 20. Call (773) 665-4802 for details.

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