Visual art

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A mystery in bits and pieces

Johnny Naugahyde's inscrutable new collages invite viewers to create their own narratives.

By TANYA HARTMAN Special to The Star

o gain access to 1522 St. Louis, a gallery in the West Bottoms, one must pass through an elaborate carpentry shop perfumed with the sap of cut wood.

A flight of stairs leads up to the main space, which has clean white walls and a modest, straightforward environment reminiscent of galleries in New York's Soho before it became an established neighborhood.

The emphasis here is on art, rather than commerce, which allows the artist-run gallery to exhibit works that are sometimes experimental and eccentric. These two adjectives could be used to describe Johnny Naugahyde's new exhibition, "The Soviet Pen Pals of Johnny Naugahyde."

Composed of 20 small collages, the show has an air of mystery and melancholy and presents as both story and image. It is an interesting display, daring and inscrutable.

The artist who coined the name Johnny Naugahyde in 1986 to separate his artist identity from his job as a curator, is a fine art program manager at Hallmark. In an interview at the gallery, he said he had always liked the sound of Johnny, and he chose the last name because "Naugahyde is a little funny and obviously fake. Naugahyde is really durable, all-American and produced outside of my hometown, Madison, Wisconsin."

His collages — the largest is 18 square inches and the smallest is 5 inches by 8 inches — are pinned to the wall of the gallery with white map pins. Many are paired with envelopes addressed to the artist that appear to have come from Russia. All works juxtapose Soviet imagery from the 1950s and 1960s with American icons from the same period, so that pictures of Lenin co-



FROM THE ARTIST

Johnny Naugahyde's "He Had No Regrets" (2013), a work composed from envelopes with collage, is part of "The Soviet Pen Pals of Johnny Naugahyde" at 1522 St. Louis, a gallery in the West Bottoms.

habit the pages alongside suburban fathers grilling steaks.

Across all the works is an alphabet of repeated motifs: medical drawings of the pelvis, stamps bearing Lenin's likeness, images of women with jaunty expressions and casually stylish clothing, Cyril-

lic writing, military generals and passport photos labeled with Russian names.

Many bear typewritten texts that create compelling hints as to what the images may convey. Read sequentially, they create no more definitive meaning than when read

individually. Yet the sentences themselves are ripe with furtive revelation: "He thought he was fully formed" and "She was honest to a fault."

Naugahyde loves language and enjoys writing and filmmaking. He says 20th-century dada artist Mar-

On display

"The Soviet Pen Pals of Johnny Naugahyde" continues at 1522 St. Louis, a gallery at 1522 St. Louis Ave., through March 29. Hours are noon-5 p.m. Saturday and by appointment. For more information, call 804-319-6559 or visit 1522saintlouis.com.

cel Duchamp is his biggest influence because his transgressions allowed Naugahyde to transform "something as mundane as an envelope into something of value."

When I tell Naugahyde my interpretation of the narrative in his work, he smiles and says he "wants the viewer to take away whatever they take from it."

"Án element in the work is the slow reveal," he added. "It is all fantasy. I bought the envelopes on eBay, over 450 of them, and they came as they are. Most of the images came from a 1948 issue of Colliers. One or two came from a 1972 issue of Post. I always tell stories in my work, and this is an emotional exercise to keep my hands and mind working."

When I press him, asking if he cares about meaning, he replies, "it doesn't matter what each viewer sees. It is a cathartic series."

Duchamp wrote that "the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act."

Johnny Naugahyde has a talent for channeling and forming creative energy and then presenting it to the viewer as nourishment for the soul, intellect and senses. But in leaving meaning open, Naugahyde invites viewers to complete his pieces through diverse interpretation, much like a collective dream with many permutations.