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dressed as birds. Condit’s superb close-up camera work examines birds and humans with almost equal curiosity. One senses how a natural environment can enchant humans, although Condit’s scripted fable sometimes sounds fatuous — “How many sparrows am I worth today?”

Still, there is no denying Condit’s skill at expositing and celebrating the interface of humanity and nature.

By contrast, Middleton’s Stephen Milanowski gives us unvarnished working-class humans, right at the gallery entrance. The blowup snapshots of portraits are interesting, but as glaring studies of consumerist behavior they feel too familiar and unsympathetic.

Why not juxtapose the manners of upper-income dwellers who consume — and drive SUVs — with increasing boorishness?

Nearby is Milwaukee painter Fred Stonehouse’s faux circus poster painting of the amazing tomato-headed man with his depressed raven-on-a-leash and his boggus magic trick: a floating skull. Stonehouse’s droll occasionalness nails the gullibility of those who swoon for cheap spiritual thrills.

I hardly mean to dissent. But that’s elusive stuff — notice how Madison painter Mark Mulhern’s ambiguous human figures seem engulfed in a suffocatingly foggy psychic dullness.

Memorable previous Triennials have probed the fear-and-loathing element of joy — the Ed Gein-Jeffrey Dahmer-Wisconsin Death Trip underbelly of Badgerland.

“Falling, Falling” is a still from a video by UW-Madison faculty member and artist Douglas Rosenberg.

This show’s brighter-toned work may reflect the sensibilities — rather than conscious thematics — of exhibitions curator Sara Krajewski, in contrast to several of her recent predecessors.

“We just look for the best art,” says Krajewski, who co-curated the exhibit with Art Center director Stephen Fleischman and curator of education Sheri Castelnuevo. “Nature is always going to be a big part of subject matter in this state.”

What does seem to be emerging is a more analytical, sometimes whimsical, spirit of art, which isn’t a half-bad prospect.

Consider the funky low-tech mechanical oddities of Madison sculptor Larry Stephens. One contraption includes a bike wheel and an oil funnel at one end of a long, precariously balanced bamboo shaft with attached handles. What is its mysterious function? Maybe to slyly critique the human compulsion to master nature’s inevitabilities — like centrifugal force and gravity. It could have been titled “Wwoooolah — Splat!”

One of the more fascinating inquiries into human behavior is Green Bay’s Carol Emmons’ “The Ambulatoiy,” a tunnel-like walkway that both ensnires and analyzes the human desire for the comforts of companionship. You will find posted a statistical study suggesting that humans are increasingly subject to institutionalization the further life casts them away from marriage. Another graphic measures how effectively a nurse becalms a hospital patient’s pulse, by simply holding hands.

A bewitching sort of romantic affirmation lurks in the superbly rendered paintings of Cedarburg’s Gina Litherland. Her thin, pallid women seem like gothic heroines aspiring to be forest goddesses. Nature is the animating force, from mythical foxes to floating forest “ephemera.”

More fascinated than besotted with nature are Madisonian Nancy Mladenoff and the duo of Lane Hall and Lisa Moline, from Wauwatosa. Mladenoff’s charmingly creepy-crawly wall mural of marching bugs shares a dramatic, quasi-scientific spirit with Hall and Moline’s arresting digital blowups of scammed insect wings. These artists pluck wings from spider webs rather than from actual flies, who otherwise — at this scale — might’ve exacted terrible revenge.

Another large work employs semi-scientific methodology to produce sensuously organic abstraction. Madison’s Linea Gabriella Spransy bases her computer-derived drawings or “algorithms of fractal images,” Krajewski says. But her final step is luscious hand renderings of baroque ornamentation that virtually breathes.

Krajewski says that many of these new techniques for exploring and examining “are going on in the larger art world. It’s something that curators are just getting a handle on now.”

She partly credits globalization and the Internet.

“I don’t feel that Wisconsin artists are tied to the old definitions of a geographic place,” she says. “So we’re seeing a wide range of traditional approaches and really different, risk-taking approaches. I hope this show reflects the real breadth and vitality of today’s art.”

Indeed, the strong works of video artists include unusual documents of Germany and Japan, each on a DVD. Madisonian Rosemary Bodaly’s high-speed train ride trip across a Japanese cityscape interfaces images of struggling goldfish and a techno-funk pulse soundtrack.

Milwaukeean Andrea Leuteneker’s 16-millimeter disc transfer is a haunted visit to a World War II German concentration camp, with chemically eroded film surfaces that feel like ecolaplasmic atmosphere, distant voices and visitors rummaging through rocks, searching for an understanding of the unspeakable.