

Review: Robert Burnier: Song Cycle at David B. Smith Gallery

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Robert Burnier's exhibition *Song Cycle* at David B. Smith Gallery in Denver features small acrylic-on-aluminum wall sculptures folded into aesthetically and conceptually compelling shapes.



Robert Burnier, *Fendetiĝi*, 2021, acrylic on aluminum, 12 x 18 x 9 in. Photo: Joshua Ware.

Robert Burnier: Song Cycle
October 21–November 24, 2021
David B. Smith Gallery, Denver

Song Cycle, a collection of ten wall sculptures by Robert Burnier, is the Chicago-based artist's second solo exhibition at David B. Smith Gallery in downtown Denver. The small, wall-mounted pieces consist of acrylic-painted aluminum folded, bent, and contorted into dense, overlapping layers of colorful metal.

According to the artist's statement, a "summer of deep listening to Marvin Gaye's musical oeuvre" acted as inspiration for the artworks on display. In fact, the titles of each piece reference or quote Gaye's lyrics, which were then translated into Esperanto.

Esperanto—a constructed language designed in 1887 to provide a universal second language for international communication—was intended to ameliorate linguistic barriers. But the fact that the global community failed to adopt it for widespread use has transformed Esperanto into a textual artifact that obfuscates meaning and renders the artist's titles opaque.

Of course, the viewer can easily enter these titles into an online Esperanto-to-English translator to discover their origins or meanings; but to employ an esoteric language that has fallen into disuse gestures toward one of the more compelling aspects of the artist's sculptures: the secret.

Indeed, the titles are more code than secret; but the folds and contortions in the sculptures create unknown materialities hidden in the tightly layered caverns and crevices that form underneath and around their visible surfaces.



Robert Burnier, *Supren Kaj Malsupren Mia Dorso, Mia Spino*, 2021, acrylic on aluminum, 13 x 9 x 4 in. Photo: Joshua Ware.

Take, for instance, *Supren Kaj Malsupren Mia Dorso, Mia Spino*. The sculpture, thirteen by nine by four inches of matte red and off-white, folds over and in on itself. While dented and distressed, the front surface presents itself as immanently viewable and, perhaps, knowable in its presentation: we see its plans, noting its color differences, shifting hues, the shadow play which the indentations create, and the artwork's overall contours and dimensions.

Examining the piece in profile, though, provides a different, decidedly more elusive view. Particularly in the red upper segment of the work, eight to ten layers of aluminum fold over on themselves. Then, toward the rear of the sculpture, metal coils into an ever-tightening, densely packed spiral. Near the center of the profile view, a glimpse of a red-to-white gradient can be seen, offering a partial or obscured look at the transformation or boundary between opposing color fields.

But what *Supren Kaj Malsupren Mia Dorso, Mia Spino's* profile *really* shows us is our inability to fully access the sculpture's inner worlds. What material intricacies do we *not* see? What crooks and indentations are lost to us? What variations in color and hue are invisible? Whereas one can decode the titles of these artworks, the interior landscapes ensconced within the folds and layering will remain forever foreign. We remain permanently estranged from the object's interiority.

Far from a sense of loss or alienation, though, the sculptures in Burnier's *Song Cycle* echo Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of the secret in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Rather than a lack to lament, the French philosophers thought of the secret as a "privileged, but quite variable, relation to perception and the imperceptible." In other words, they lauded the secret as a particular type of arbiter or flexible/permeable boundary between the known and unknown—a dynamic and mutable area that facilitated becomings and transformations.

Moreover, the philosophers claimed that secrets stemmed from "content [that] is *too big* for its form" and, thus, necessitates that the "form is covered [or] doubled' into an "infinite form of secrecy" that becomes "molecularized" in, for example, the line of a painter or the "rhythmic cell" of a musician. Stated differently, the secret disperses and inheres itself into the most minute and basic structural elements of an artist's creation. In Burnier's case, this renders layers and contortions necessary so as to convey content fully through the increased surface caused by folding. In doing so, this formal maneuver infuses the work and the viewer's experience with an ever-present sense of wonder and possibility.

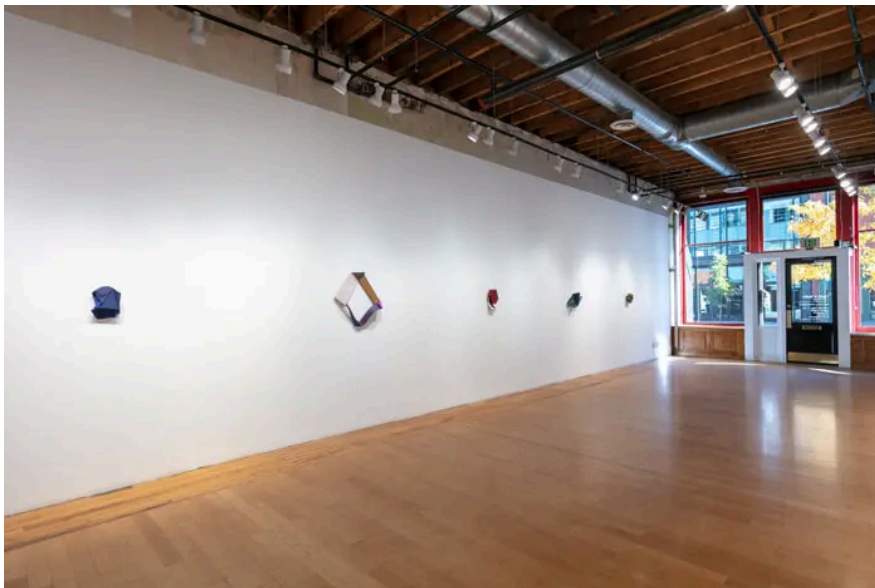


Robert Burnier, *Supren Kaj Malsupren Mia Dorso, Mia Spino*, 2021, acrylic on aluminum, 13 x 9 x 4 in. Photo: Joshua Ware.

To this extent, the secret is *not* something that needs to be discovered or solved; rather, the secret secretes into the entirety of a work, producing a perpetual state of complexity and intended uncertainty.

Outside of the John Chamberlain-esque beauty of Burnier's wall sculptures, this is the promise that the objects in *Song Cycle* offer us: an infinite sense of the speculative; or, as the artist himself writes about his work, these folded objects envision a "shifting ground between" different pasts and futures and all their "complex histories and manifestations." While such shifting and complexity might leave us unmoored and the object indeterminate, the artist and his works allow us to revel joyously in the countless possibilities concealed within the folds.

Robert Burnier: *Song Cycle* remains on view through November 24, 2021, at David B. Smith Gallery, 1543 Wazee St A, Denver.



Robert Burnier, *Song Cycle*, installation view, 2021, David B. Smith Gallery, Denver.

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