Artists respond to their environments, and this tenor has an underground figurative tradition based on repetition, one is lulled (or beaten) into a state of creative individuals in many ways. Its strain of American psyche Lock rock is loud and durational. Through extended songs that rely on high volume repetition, one is lulled (or beaten) into a state of passive acceptance until Isabel Sollenberger vocally sucker punches the audience out from its sleepy-ness and into a state of temporary ecstasis. It is a palpable and visceral experience. Many of the artists that are associated with this scene have generated works that provide similar effects in the visual field.

Much of the work in Little Berlin’s ‘Heaven and Earth’ exhibition has been wrought by the aforementioned coalition of friends and colleagues. This is a genuine arts community that has drawn from one another. Harrod’s stairway performs similar initiatory rites of passage. Swenbeck’s drawings sublimated counter histories of secret societies and initiated rites of passage. Swenbeck’s drawings reflect the darker side of this art historical trajectory, as well as embodying Sach’s description of a local ethos that is both dark and abject.

Richard Harrod has been producing art and exhibiting within the city for the last 15 years. Harrod’s works have at times set up situations for encounters with the uncanny that are disorienting and funny. In the Little Berlin exhibition, with a work titled ‘The Managers’ Harrod provides a trompe loeil image of a life sized rectangular hole in the floor of the space (on the actual floor) with its cross section. The illusion is not convincing, but one still feels a little wary walking around it. To reinforce the sense of vertical depth, Harrod has run a string from the floor to the ceiling thus literalizing the name of the exhibition.

The title of Harrod’s floor work could have been taken directly from Kafka or Maurice Blanchot. In Blanchot’s most Kafkaesque novel Aminadab, the protagonist Thomas wanders into a house that has infinite rooms with an ever-changing set of rules and hierarchically distributed roles for the servants and managers. There is no comfort to be found in the bedrooms, and the mood of the house constantly oscillates between safety and danger. The novel is dream-like. Blanchot intimates how the impressions left on us by interiors are perpetually in a state of flux with strange atemporal admixtures of the absurdist and that ‘there is also a dark, almost abject sensibility going back to Charles Bukowski, the absurd’ and that ‘there is also a dark, almost abject sensibility going back to Charles Bukowski, the absurd and the dark and the occult is inscribed in the alchemical and contaminating the domestic scene with absurd and spooky details.

Another exhibition with artists from the same community is the ‘None More Black’ show at Vox Populi. A standout from the show was Paul Swenbeck’s suite of blood drawings. Swenbeck’s work explores the trope of the uncanny, inside and outside the body. This blood was used in a manner similar to ink that was transferred to paper with brushes and pens. Swenbeck borrows images from the book of Solomon to create talismans that hopefully will work to ward off any attacks on the artist’s work with blood. This fascination began with a sanguine fluid drawing made from a high school biology blood test that the artist has carried in his wallet for more than 20 years for good luck. These drawings are generous and frightening. In an altruisic gesture, Swenbeck donated the blood that could provide nutrients and oxygen to his muscles and brain for the production of drawings that are to be consumed by others. Still, the occult symbols with their Faustian connotations are troublesome with their lack of intelligibility or supplementary word texts, leaving one to guess who the intended recipient of the talismans may be.

There is no apparent investment in critical theory in any of these works, nor do they bear the mark of a voguish miming of current art world trends. Most of the artists in this informal community came into their own in the early to mid 90’s, a moment when French theory was being crammed down throats of resentful artists throughout the country. It appears that their work is part of a generational rejection of the era’s theoretical trends. These artists work with the tropes of the uncanny, inside and outside the body, and rejection of the era’s theoretical trends. These artists work with the tropes of the uncanny, inside and outside the body, and a renewed interest in the occult, without resorting to the intellectual crutches of philosophy, psychoanalysis or semiotics.

A problem with projects that have an anti-theoretical attitude is that the artists do not provide the public with a form of self-diagnoses through their statements or public talks, and therefore leave the ideas behind their work unintelligible and opaque for the uninstructed. The burden is placed on the viewer to decipher and decode their offerings. Due to the swaying indeterminacy of the artists’ intent, one is cautious of over-reading its drawings and installations. This caution short circuits extensive readings and cuts off a wider and more meaningful discourse.

Genuine alternative artworlds are vulnerable and precious. They provide a very thin crust of resistance from the banalizing effects of living in a voguish miming of current art world trends. If there are gatherings of friends who share an aesthetic project no matter how small, the artists’ intent, one is cautious of over-reading its drawings and installations. This caution short circuits extensive readings and cuts off a wider and more meaningful discourse.

- Holly Martins