

**ENTERTAINMENT**

# MCA Denver's (not too) likable showcase of Joel Swanson and Ian Fisher

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By **RAY MARK RINALDI** | [media@rayrinaldi.com](mailto:media@rayrinaldi.com) | The Denver Post

PUBLISHED: January 23, 2014 at 9:30 am | UPDATED: April 27, 2016 at 11:51 pm

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Artists don't want to be liked too much. A little fawning, that's just fine, especially if it leads to selling work. But anything close to widespread appeal can ruin a career, and fast.

Contemporary artists are expected to challenge the way we think and see, to make us uncomfortable, not win us over with warmth. Like IRS auditors, journalists and beauty-contest judges, we want them to call out the ugly, expose the truth at the expense of personal popularity.

So, with some caution I encourage you to enjoy the work of Joel Swanson and Ian Fisher, each with a show at the [Museum of Contemporary Art Denver](#). But resist its ability to make you very happy.

The artists work differently, but both offer a raw delight. [Fisher](#), because his paintings of giant clouds colliding in the skies tend to knock people out with their beauty. [Swanson](#), because his plays on language use plain English and deliver a solid punch line.

Of course, both minds run deeper than they first appear; their humor and good looks are a byproduct of their attempts to give us a shake. Each invites the same sort of delamination, and you can see why MCA curator [Nora Burnett Abrams](#) made the user-friendly choice of exhibiting them at the same time.

Swanson's "Left to Right, Top to Bottom" plays out like a crossword puzzle. The artist gives us a word or symbol, then a clue, and lets us take it from there. He hangs a 3-foot, sideways "V" from the ceiling and sets it rotating on its string. As soon as you make it out to mean "greater than" it spins around into "less than." Language, we come to understand, is fluid, unstable and we interpret it from our own point of view.

For "Sincerely," he simply isolates that single word – a cursive sign-off from an actual hand-written letter – and blows it up to fill a full, 36-foot wall in the museum. Does its size make it more sincere or less? Does it have any meaning at all at such proportion?

It isn't just words Swanson explores but the way language itself is assembled over time. His "Lady Gaga's Twitter Feed Translated into Morse Code," delivers the pop star's actual social-media messages via a bullet-size beacon, set on a waist-high podium, that flashes on and off in real time. In a de-evolution of languages, ones and zeroes become dots and dashes and we see how communication takes on structure.

These aren't deep thoughts necessarily. Like a lot of conceptual art, once you get the gist of a Swanson work, the thrill dissipates. All that flashing, spinning, writing requires a lot of effort to deliver a single thunk. This is where its likability comes close to taking it all down.

But Swanson is a complex thinker, and the accumulation of objects here adds up to a deep and enjoyable trip through an unusual mind. At 35, he's built an impressive résumé, which includes his current job as Director of the Technology, Arts & Media Program at the University of Colorado in Boulder, as interesting and complicated a place as you will find.

His work is just weird enough to keep you on edge, and the grand effort required to present it makes it both complete and compelling. For "Ampersand," Swanson hand-wrote the "&" character 25,000 times in a grid directly on the wall. It's a marvel of human labor and a rich consideration of an everyday symbol that goes on & on & on & on. All at once, language is a pattern, a drawing, interpretable, mysterious and thrilling.

Fisher's thrills take less brain power, but require a longer look. He paints clouds in turbulent, skyscapes full of color, puff, swirl and organic drama. Clouds knock into clouds, sharing, overlaying, infiltrating each other's airspace. This is nothing you want to see during takeoff or landing at DIA, but tamed and contained on large canvases, it can be stunning.

This work has a commercial side that makes it suspect. The MCA shows a lot of art, and almost none of it is as pretty as Fisher's. Not yet 30, the painter is already repped by prestigious [Robischon Gallery](#). His oil paintings have a Western, big-sky quality that fetches serious money in these parts.

But ordinary painters don't end up at the MCA or on Robischon's roster. Fisher takes us into the deep space of our heads by pairing the categorical with the abstract. His "Atmosphere No. 50" combines true clouds of white, orange and blue with almost artificial, black, cloud-like shapes. In "Atmosphere No. 51" he focuses on too much sky, commanding a look at the bigger picture above us.

He lets drips of paint turn the canvas unpleasant for "Atmosphere No. 35," creating an abrupt, fasten-your-seatbelt moment that reminds us we are looking at a painting and not a photograph — at art and not an advertisement for air travel.

In the same way that Swanson wows us with effort, Fisher interrupts our peaceful journey by showing his own hand. Stopping the natural affability of his scenery in its tracks, adding a layer of wonder and interest.

Viewers will fawn over both shows, until they don't, and the place where they stop will determine just how good they think this work is. Likability in the eyes of the beholder, just where it ought to be.

*Ray Mark Rinaldi: 303-954-1540, [rrinaldi@denverpost.com](mailto:rrinaldi@denverpost.com) or [twitter.com/rayrinaldi](https://twitter.com/rayrinaldi)*

### Ray Mark Rinaldi

Fine arts critic Ray Mark Rinaldi is a veteran journalist covering classical music, visual art, opera, dance and more. [Follow Ray Mark Rinaldi @rayrinaldi](#)



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