

## Lagniappe

## Art's nouveau-rizons

By Doug MacCash

Art critic

## REVIEW

The "Raw Data" exhibit of conceptual art on the ground floor of the Contemporary Arts Center could have its own subversive information-age slogan: Can you understand me now?

Each of the show's five artists begin with a recognizable set of symbols or codes, that they then cut, splice, erase, garble and otherwise obscure into a mostly incomprehensible visual jargon of their own.

Louisiana-born Matthew Sontheimer has broken his father's signature into 26 jittery fragments, which he pieces together to create secret diary entries. Can you understand me now?

UNO graduate John Davis whites-out the text on tax documents, electronic charts and even the pictures on jigsaw puzzles, reducing them to inscrutable white-on-white blankness. Can you understand me now?

Wisconsin transplant Joan Kay collects the ominous minute-by-minute hurricane tracking data from various

weather Web sites and mathematically reinterprets the meteorological info as abstract sculptures with dangling ribbons, wires and soda straws. Can you understand me now?

Stephen Sollins, who splits his time between New Orleans and New York, strips the threads from the No-Place-Like-Home-style samplers he finds in junk stores. He then uses a similar quantity and color of thread to reinterpret the samplers as modernist geometric designs. Can you understand me now?

New Orleans premier conceptualist Robert Tannen (whose portion of the show was reviewed in the Jan. 21

Lagniappe) used a computer to generate all possible two-, three- and four-letter combinations, some of which are words; most of which aren't. Can you understand me now?

Can we understand you?

No way.

And that is the point of the show. The information age has given us many wonderful things. An unprecedented trove of facts, figures and modes of communication is always right at our fingertips. Yet life seems as mysterious as it ever has — maybe more so.

The "Raw Data" artists seem to know that. Each, in his or her own way, revels in reducing communication to mumbling, in shaping science into decoration and turning earnestness to irony. Each gives us a sort of artistic Rubik's Cube to unscramble if we'd like, or just to enjoy for the bright colors, if we'd rather.

If you're a Rubik's Cube sort of person, like me (decoding art is my job, of course), you'll probably appreciate it. If not, you may want to give the show a look anyway, because like-it-or-not, info-based art is one of the dominant movements of our era.

## RAW DATA

## CONCEPTUAL ART IN LOUISIANA

**What:** Information-age art by five Louisiana-born or -based artists.

**Where:** The Contemporary Arts Center, 900 Camp St., 528-3805.

**When:** Tues-Sun, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., through March 27.

**Admission:** Adults \$5, students and seniors \$3; free on Thursdays.