

# A cool look at Cold War art

By Keith V. Shaw, Special to The Eagle

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Saturday, November 01 PITTSFIELD — Michael McKay's "Living in the Ice Age" at Zeitgeist may strike visitors as cold, but it won't leave them cold.

The exhibit is a visual reminiscence of the Cold War era and offers commentaries on American living during that period. A prominent sub theme is the morphing of the American Dream. In the show, family life transmigrates from backyard fallout shelters, to aluminum-clad suburbia, and then to its final resting place — city high-rise apartments.

McKay gives a cold look at his subjects, and his pieces have a visual coldness to them. The artwork is flat, grayed, and cheerless. Not a hint of sentimentality or nostalgia surfaces in these views. Instead, they are dispassionate recollections, perhaps edged with a trace of condemnation.

The artist selectively appropriates visual language from the Cold War decades, intelligently devising pictorial time capsules. His paintings of fallout shelters adopt the style of civil defense instructional manuals: clear, explanatory illustrations. These pieces are double-layered panels with cutaways "revealing" scenes of domestic life inside the bunkers.

These panels exemplify McKay's zealotry for sacrificing aesthetics on the altar of Concept. "Statement pieces" have limited shelf life unless they have something else going for them.

McKay's depictions of new homes and automobiles evoke the 1960s. His imagery seems lifted from

dated real estate ads, and he uses Warhol's early serigraphic style to capture the moment.

The shaped panels entitled "Smokerise Circle" depict prefab homes on tiny plots of land. Cloud-like, these paintings seem to levitate, and bring to mind such phrases as pipe dream, up in smoke, and pie in the sky; all have intriguing applications for the American Dream.

Suburbia is left behind in McKay's urbanescapes, which recall Warhol's photographic imagery from the 1970s and '80s. These emotionless views of high-rises and expressways depict the dismal life of shared walls and shared rides. "Day for Night" is a particularly thought-provoking piece.

The related "Life is Elsewhere" paintings show airliners taxing on the tarmac, forever suspended between home and destination: The American Dream derailed. The syncopated dialogue between flatness and form in "Life is Elsewhere 2" makes this painting one of the best; here, statement and aesthetics come together.

McKay is a thinking artist, and he has given the public much to chew and digest. Readers should make an effort to catch his show at the Zeit.

If you go

What : Zeitgeist

Where: 648 North St., Pittsfield.

Gallery hours : Wednesdays through Fridays 4 to 9 p.m., Saturdays 1 to 9 p.m., Sundays 1 to 8 p.m.

Currently on display "Living in the Ice Age," recent paintings by Michael McKay from the repellent addictive series through Nov. 9.