

CITY NEWSPAPER

ART REVIEW: "Members: Rochester Contemporary Members Show"

The beautiful and the hideous

By Rebecca Rafferty on December 10, 2008

Maybe it's the weather, but I focused on a whole lot of death- or darkly-themed art at Rochester Contemporary's 18th Annual Members Exhibition. I adore the skillful celebration of beauty, but I'm also strongly drawn to dark, delicate art that seeks and burns with curiosity and wonderment. If that art goes beyond simply conveying beauty to dare speak about social issues, I believe that it must not deny emotional and moral complexity, and contain no arrogant pretense of possessing the Truth. But I'll get back to that.

At 190 pieces (up from about 150 contributions last year), the one-piece-per-member show sported a range of styles, themes, and media, and there was plenty of moody art, with playful pieces to inject levity here and there. There isn't room enough to discuss everything that struck me as wonderful, but here are a few that really caught my attention.

Photography

I was immediately intrigued by Petra Tuns' "No Room for Emotion," a large scale, close-up photo of a woman's face, disturbingly smothered by a sea creature's tentacles. It looks a whole lot like a coldly intimate run-in with Cthulhu, whose suffocating embrace is preventing any expression on the part of the passive woman.

Christina Sevilla's chilly toned inkjet "Wade in the Water" is printed on fine art metal, which lends some oomph to the reflective quality of water. Viewers are mesmerized by the interplay of the reflected trees and the sky imposed over dead leaves visible just below the surface.

"The Inner Lives of Leaves" is a collaboration by husband and wife Carl Chiarenza and Heidi Katz. Two sepia-toned pics embrace a central silvery photo, each expressing a fragile and tension-filled composition.

Sculpture

The elegantly organic "Debacle" by Lucas Jones is a wall piece in which dark steel whip-limbs cradle a thin glass vessel, and the entire piece is dancing off a precarious corner. Because of the placement, we are able to see the form from more sides than if it were placed flat on a wall.

Paul Brandwein's playful miscellany will not be contained. "Outside the Box" is a mixed-media colorful square whose innards recede into space, with bright bits of shape caught here and there, creeping outward from the main square.

Most imposing is John Tracey's "Untitled," a skeletal, black, and massive rectangular wall piece of fired clay, oil paint, and graphite. Pitted arms of coral wind and wrap over various species of shelled creatures and starfish. The intricate piece is marvelous, and was clearly crafted with loving patience and with a conscious focus on the balance of barely contained chaos. I overheard one viewers' startled reaction: "It's a dead coral reef! Oh my god, this is what we're doing!"

Mixed media/collage

My personal rule in writing these reviews is to avoid giving press to work I strongly dislike. But damn it, consider me provoked. Jose Olivieri-Rivera's compassion-lacking, self-righteous "Work in Progress" is a condemnation of abortion, vented in bad art by an individual who will never be encumbered by the complex situations that might lead to such a decision. But my box is getting rather soapy here. Onward to joyful things...

Dear Antoinette Moon: your sculpture "The Woods & The Sea" is utterly beautiful and belongs on an altar, with its two totem-like pillars, each a cement stand crowned by a curved crescent and a medley of flora and fauna remnants. And P.S., Can I please have your name?

Scott McCarney's "MODA" shows us some skin! The "encyclopornia collage" consists of two vintage encyclopedia pages with bubbles and dashes cut into the left page to reveal an eye, part of a thigh, and some moist skin. It isn't hard to piece together what's going on there, and the piece edgily pairs our academic minds with our voyeuristic tendencies.

I almost overlooked "Paint the Town Red" by Lee Hoag, which is a simple paintbrush with dried red paint hanging from a nail on the wall. The piece got a lot more interesting when my friend pointed out a subtlety: the price info is "700 billion and counting"; with a subtle slap, it references the bailout.

Drawing

"Turtle Island" by Robert Cease is a gorgeous ink stippling piece, recalling the Native American myth of the sea turtle holding the world on its back. The piece is beautiful, from the creature's slow lift of its head above the water, to its burden of mountains and forest, to the oval swirl of cosmic debris encompassing the ocean.

Painting

J. Dungan's watercolor "In the Evening" is a glowing, gloaming scene that made me yearn to walk along the fields of my rural hometown in autumnal air and then retreat indoors to read fireside. It also made me seriously jealous of the artist's certainty and trust in the medium, conveyed in quick brushstrokes that perfectly capture the tone and emotion of such a scene.

My favorite piece of the show is "J's Bag's" by Melissa Mance. The large oil-on-canvas piece hosts five plastic grocery bags gracefully floating in empty, pale blue space. Mance's soft, flowing style of painting lends a mysterious tenor to the strange still life: at first I thought I was looking at seashells, and then O'Keeffe-esque skulls. The work is really skillfully done; the dark, vague contents of the bags weigh them down realistically. It's rare to see such a banal subject treated with such elegance.

Support the art of the supporters of art; duck in from the cold and choose your own favorites.

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Through January 18

Rochester Contemporary Art Center, 137 East Ave

461-2222, rochestercontemporary.org

Wed-Sun 1-5 p.m.