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ART REVIEW: "Makers & Mentors" 2012

By Rebecca Rafferty on February 10, 2012

When one generation is connected to another through a chain of mentorship, it isn't only technical skills that are conveyed; philosophies and the sparks for independent innovation are passed along as well. This is illustrated in the new edition of the fascinating "Makers and Mentors" series at Rochester Contemporary. The show features new and recent artworks by painter, and retired printmaker and professor, Robert Ernst Marx, as well as two of his former students, Ron Pokrasso and David Bumbeck.

The spirit of the exhibition series is to reconnect old colleagues, and provide a "moment to shine a light on the importance of art education in our area," says Rochester Contemporary Director Bleu Cease. Two of the featured artists were present for the February 5 artists' talk. Marx and Pokrasso lamented that not many people are taught that passion is a better measure of success than anything. It's crucial that artists are "passionate about the making," Pokrasso says. Being an artist is a verb, more than a noun.

The trio of creators in this show conveys relatable inner and outer human experiences. Though each artist includes the human form in his work, all three artists resist literal portraiture, instead focusing on expression, saturation of hue, and gesture to convey that which is universal and recognizable. The results communicate more about emotion and state of being than specific identity ever could. Just as we mentally apprehend one another, these subjects and their states are captured in complicated flux; they are equally inner and outer portraits, shifting aspects suspended in the image.

The 14 works by Ron Pokrasso in this show are a seamless mix of techniques including intaglio, monotype, drawing, and collage, disparate media rallied together with form and narrative emerging from symbolic imagery. Figures caught by the inward tug of reverie interact, consciously or not, with the recurring, imposing form of a wrought-iron fence or a single, gnarled tree. A blanket of fallen leaves leads to a massive old tree

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"Voyager" by David Bumbeck, part of this year's "Makers and Mentors" exhibit at Rochester Contemporary Art Center. PHOTO PROVIDED



"Remembrance of a Graveled Past" by Robert Ernst Marx, now on view at the "Makers and Mentors" exhibit at Rochester Contemporary Art Center. PHOTO PROVIDED

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in "Marker," and three gravestone-shaped, text-filled objects emerge from the bottom of the work. Where they hit the central scene, they are colored like a triplet of setting suns in a sky of faded purple.

"Newest Gate Keeper" contains a profile of a bearded man with the familiar gate before him, while below, twin clock chains and weights hang over two figures hidden by diagonal stripes. Pokrasso is interested in playing with partial obscurity, "by the notion of 'here/not here,' of 'pushing the portrait back,'" he says. "It's not about, 'Here I am,' it's about, 'Look for me.'" Many of Pokrasso's figures, as in "Fence Sitter," cross their arms over their chests, seemingly not out of stubbornness, but specifically in a delicate gesture of cradling their ailing, indecisive selves.

For his experimental figure-in-the-landscape work, David Bumbeck uses a much less subdued color palette than the other two artists. Thirteen ornately framed works include collages of images ranging from decorative paper to powdered-wig-wearing ladies, and jarringly neon-sherbet-hued acrylic paintings, some with glitter. His painted people and objects are sharply contrasted with the stiff patterns and people in his collages.

In "The Gift," decorative floral paper is pasted over with classic ladies' busts and faces, as well as a calm, blue-toned scene with a hand holding a sphere. Bumbeck's works are enigmatic, offering a multi-dimensional, jumbled look into a world that chaotic minds have struggled to order, map, and categorize, while simultaneously peeking into the shambly minds themselves.

Three boxed-in sections of Bumbeck's collage and acrylic work, titled "Voyager," depict a triple-eyed, transparent head containing a clear blue sky and ship sailing on a choppy sea, a moon and lightning bolt, and prismatic stripes. These electric-hued faces tend to be split down the center and alongside the nose, simultaneously creating forward-facing people and their profiles.

Lost, fumbling souls dwell amid Robert Marx's dark, earthy palette, solitary or loosely bound by cords of ambiguous relationships. What's fascinating is that Marx rejected portraiture because he didn't like the "sadness of the eye contact," he says. It took him 20 years to figure out "what to do with people," and in many ways, he says, he's still figuring it out.

The fragile ambiguity in Marx's oeuvre is achieved through his process of painting, sanding down, and reworking each piece constantly - it may take him two to four years to finish a work - which serves to develop the emotional quality that permeates through the thick atmosphere of layers. His own presence in the work is cautious, watchful, wistful.

During the February 5 gallery talk, audience members described visceral emotional reactions to Marx's work - as did I. Marx's part in the show includes 11 paintings, one bronze sculpture, and one graphite drawing, entitled "Separation," which is a delicately drawn front-facing figure, with a second bust splitting off the side in profile, then disappearing.

In Marx's paintings, muddy backgrounds are infused with pulsing warmth, or permeating chills - his darkneses are never voids. "Hard and Skeptical" is a work of cool, blue-toned darkness, featuring a face with a white mask covering the lower-half, through which you can still detect a hard-set mouth. Bands of circles emanate from each



Robert Ernst Marx's "A Still Small Voice Within" part of this year's "Makers and Mentors" exhibit at Rochester Contemporary Art Center. PHOTO PROVIDED



"Fence Sitter" by Ron Pokrasso, part of this year's "Makers and Mentors" exhibit at Rochester Contemporary Art Center. PHOTO PROVIDED

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side of the head, perhaps representing information passing through. The circles clustering at the throat read like an energetic focus, where the voice is trapped.

"Lost Illusions" has two forward-facing figures, the head of the one at left surrounded by pale markings in a flurry of shock or unrest, and a white band sliding off the head and away. A spectral hand stretches across from the right to the abdomen area of the left figure. The person on the right is barely more than a face, and below, a mess of black marks replace the belly, as if this person is disturbed to the core. Marx's works are powerful emblems of humanity's frailty, faults, and foils, but his expressed frustrations and fears are paired with a compassionate rendering of human fragility.

You can learn more about Marx and his process by watching the video interview at the exhibit or online at rochestercontemporary.org.

"Makers & Mentors" 2012

By Robert Ernst Marx, Ron Pokrasso and David Bumbeck

Through March 18

Rochester Contemporary Art Center, 137 East Ave.

461-2222, rochestercontemporary.org

Wed-Sun 1-5 p.m. \$1, free to members

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