

Arts And Entertainment

By Kevin Dean and Kay Kipling

Art

Joan Hodgell Gallery

"Figuration in the '80s" is the name of the show. The 19 artists chosen to illustrate that theme range in style from the real to the expressionistic. The tools of their view of humankind run the gamut between the common oil on canvas to what Kurt Schwitters referred to as "the waste of the world."

Yeah, but is it good art, or even art at all? "My two-year-old boy could do that, har, har, har."

Yeah, it's art. And most of it is good stuff, too.

It's easy to recognize the skill of Brian Curtis, Marsha Isaacson, or Tony Eitharong, whose imagery is at least based in objectivity. The work of Kenneth Shaw, Gary Komarin and Josette Urso, on the other hand, will puzzle some people and undoubtedly elicit remarks like the one above. But I invite those who think what Shaw, Komarin and Urso do is easy to try it. Anyone with a modicum of talent can learn to render with a pencil. But once trained, to turn out a convincing, sophisticated painting in a manner as honest, powerful and uninhibited as a child or a passionate primitive is more difficult than it seems.

That's not to take away anything from Curtis, Isaacson or Eitharong. All three go beyond technically proficient renderings of the human figure. Curtis works subtle subjective color into his clean images of people in rooms. Isaacson and Eitharong begin with nearly flawless pencil renderings but add depth to their figurative work through content. The former's "Woman with Striped Chairs" is a mysterious drawing in which the top of the subject's head dissolves into the nothingness of the white paper. The latter turns a standing self-portrait into a drawing about drawing by partially erasing the image and adding sentences of self-criticism on the drawing's weaknesses.

Raw Power

As for Komarin, Urso and Shaw, the raw, expressive quality of their work makes it vital, exciting and unforgettable whether you like the things or not.

The same can be said for Robert Beauchamp's paintings. One of the biggest names in the exhibition, Beauchamp has made a career of creating figures out of multicolored impasto pulls of the brush, splatters and stains. Through these means he creates images that confront the viewer with an undeniable power.

Gladys Nilsson, the well-known Chicago watercolorist, gives the show a bit of funkiness with her colorful, stylized figures, as does Maria Brito-Avellana with her anthropomorphic house afire on a table suffering earthquake damage. In Brito-Avellana's second and similar piece we get a self-portrait — inside and out — in the form of architecture and furniture.

There is humor with bite in Gilberto Ruiz' work as well. In "Let Me Show You How" various consumer goods seem to be juggled about by one character while others watch in amazement.

On the other hand, there is something disturbing about Jeff Whipple's "What Are Friends For," with its odd interactions between humans and small animals and two boys in their underwear.

Nor is there anything pleasant about Jerry Cutler's purse-snatching pictures. Here loose handling of the paint and the figure, along with arbitrary colors and the subject matter itself, produces a tough, uncompromising painting for the '80s.

But as expressive as Cutler is, his teachings at the University of Florida demand academic drawing and painting as a starting point in the training of would-be artists. This is as it should be. Behind every good expressionist is an artist that can produce an image as realistic as Eitharong's nude. The expressionists in this exciting and challenging show are probably no exception.

Correction

From the red-faced department comes this correction: The glass artist now being handled by the Joan Hodgell Gallery is John Littleton, not Littlejohn as previously mentioned.

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