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A Pose by Any Other Name

Gallery Joe's figure-drawing exhibit pushes the boundaries of the genre.

By Roberta Fallon

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Gallery Joe has been a leader in the drawing field for many years, quietly debuting artist after artist in one great show after another. And while figures have appeared in the gallery before--in sculpture by Diana Moore and Gil Kerlin and photography by Kate Moran--"Figure Out" is the gallery's first drawing show devoted to the figure. While there are numerous venues to see figure drawing in Philadelphia, this is a great way to survey the field in one place.

The seven- person exhibit--local artists Marilyn Holsing, Rob Matthews and Sarah McEneaney, and nonlocals Robyn O'Neil, Nils Karsten, Sabeen Raja and Josephine Taylor--demonstrates a breadth of approaches, from photo-based pieces to works of fantastical inner vision.



Perhaps the most radical is Matthews' grid of 12 positive and negative graphite drawings in *Sleepwalk: Philadelphia*. Like X-rays, his drawings evoke a world in which specialized knowledge is the key to interpretation. Barring that, it's all Rorschach--or dreams. (Matthews' portraits of eccentric buildings are also on view at Philadelphia Art Alliance through Aug. 8.)

Outside of school few artists make figure drawings from live models anymore. Instead, the source material comes right out of the artist's inner pressure cooker. And while artists used to hide the fact that they worked from photographs, they now play up the photo connections.

The thrust of these figure drawings is narrative, though now (courtesy of photography, perhaps) stories show the a postmodern distancing instead of the earnest heat of narrative painters like Poussin or Persian or Indian miniature painters.

Many artists today refer back to the miniaturist tradition. In this show, Pakistan-born Sabeen Raja, who studied in the U.S., quotes Persian and Chinese traditions in works both lovely and funny.

The work in this show happens to be relatively small--but sometimes narrative-drawing artists work in epic scale. Robyn O'Neil, for example, has a wall-sized drawing in the current Whitney Biennial. Both scales, intimate and epic, seem to work.

Narrative works often rely on symbolism to convey message, and there's plenty of that here. Matthews and McEneaney construct narratives of self that stand in for everyman or woman. The others construct narratives using fictional figures that may or may not be based in reality. In all cases, though, they're symbolic of a kind of human innocence.

Karsten, a German-born New York artist, creates child figures who sometimes pose in sexually suggestive postures. The artist's female figures reminded me of the ambisexual girls in artist Henry Darger's world, though Karsten's stream-of-consciousness imagery is quite different--more like a teenager's sketchbook (see image above).

While reflecting the culture's obsession with children and sex, Karsten's also got war and alienation on his mind, as you can see in the symbolic objects that swirl around the figures. (His work also appears this month in the Fourth Room at Vox Populi.)

Holsing and Taylor use children as stand-ins in dark, death-imbued drawings. Both artists' drawings do for children's book illustrations (their most obvious reference) what Judith Schaechter does for stained glass--turns them into adult-rated material.

This is just one instance of figure drawing around town. Go check out the figures at other venues like the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts student show, Seraphin Gallery and Vox Populi.

"Figure Out," through June 26. Gallery Joe, 302 Arch St. 215.592.7752. www.galleryjoe.com

sketches

"Selection" Process

Jeff Soto and **Mitch O'Connell** have similar messages about our culture of excess: They're against it. In a show opening Saturday at **Tin Man Alley**, the two artists (Soto's from Fullerton, Calif., and O'Connell is from Chicago) deliver well-drawn, raucous commentary on spewing industrial waste and bleating electronic media. Soto's fantasy acrylic paintings on found wood planks--which I saw in reproduction, but remember loving in a show here last year--seem infused with resonant antiwar themes. The large (6 feet by 5 feet), layered work *Regretful War Machine*, with its sad Cyclopsian limp-legged character, has new religious undertones.

O'Connell's garish gouache-on-panel works tweak retro imagery from advertising and TV. His appropriation of shopping mall "relaxation pictures" as background for his sickly sweet imagery is great. The artists' sad-angry imagery packs a punch with sophistication and wit. (R.F.)

"(un)Natural Selection: New Works by Jeff Soto and Mitch O'Connell," through June 27. Opening reception Sat., May 22, 6-10pm. Tin Man Alley, 608 N. Second St. 215.923.1418. www.tinmanalley.net





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