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Modern Muses

By Georgette Gouveia



This sculpture is by Elisheva Levy of Yale University, one of 16 undergraduate and graduate students whose sculpture is featured in "First Look II" exhibit at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in Peekskill through May 12. Her work was selected from approximately 1,000 studios nationwide.

The 16 undergraduate and graduate students in "First Look II," at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in Peekskill through May 12, were selected from approximately 1,000 studios nationwide. So it's difficult, center officials say, to identify overarching themes or patterns in the show.

"When you're dealing with young and emerging artists, there is such a plurality," says Paul Brewer, the center's new executive director. "We try to address that plurality and show the best work we can."

Still, it's possible to connect the dots to reveal a bigger picture. "First Look II," like much contemporary art, is concerned with appearance versus reality and the way labor-intensive, technological works contribute to that face-off.

Even a casual glance at "First Look" reveals you're not in Kansas anymore. Or even in Red Riding Hood's forest. In "Kiss Kiss" (2006) - a sculptural tableau by David Mitchell, a graduate student at New York University - a little girl encounters the big, bad wolf, or in this case, the big, bad coyote. Only this little girl, clad in frilly pink and white, is more than a match for big teeth, drawing first blood with a vampiric bite. "Kiss Kiss" is about women's fear of men and men's fear of women's sexuality. But it explores this by Gender reversal also plays a part in Hunter College graduate student Bryan Zanisnik's short films "Remembrance of Things Past" and "Family Reunion."

The first stars his grandmother as a World War II soldier single-handedly mowing down 30 Nazis from a tent and as a Vietnam veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. The second features Grandma as a bigoted Italian immigrant, who's the victim of an equally prejudiced immigration official (played by Zanisnik's mother).

The subject matter and deliberately cheesy production values - harking back to the films Zanisnik made as a boy - ensures that there's something to offend virtually everyone but especially veterans, Italian-Americans, immigrants and immigration officials.

But by casting an older woman in the role of a soldier and a violent civilian, Zanisnik forces us to examine how we experience things and remember those experiences. And darn if it isn't moving when Grandma, having picked off those Nazis, emerges from that tent (actually a basement) triumphantly, with "The Star-Spangled Banner" blaring. The story spun in the photographic series "We Are Untitled" - by Sean Fader, a graduate student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago - is a tale of love, not war. The two men in the trio of color photos bed each other, playfully toss stones into a stream and part at a train station. Fader plays both parts, suggesting that before you can fall in love with anyone, you have to have a dialogue with yourself.

As with "We Are Untitled," the disparity between appearance and reality isn't always immediately apparent. The humorously titled "Desperately Optimistic" (2006) - by SUNY New Paltz student Michael Brown, the only undergraduate in the show - features aluminum and stainless steel lawn chairs and Budweiser cans.

You think: Anyone can do this. But then you learn how Brown stripped down and rebuilt the chairs and you think: He's earned the right to kick back in one of these chairs. Many of the works in the show require a great deal of physical and technical mastery. While artists have always been good at the mechanical stuff, what sets contemporary artists apart is their ability to telegraph their technological skills.

Stanford University student Diane Landry has created two sets of moving pictures using salad spinners, while Purchase College student Melissa Skluzacek's "Proto Hollow" (2004) emits a haunting industrial sound from an open, curving structure. I cannot imagine how they came up with these, let alone how T. Marie, a Bard College student, fashioned the kaleidoscopic pixel painting "Emersion" (2006).

On the other hand, Pratt Institute student Michael Nemire's "Color Painting No. 1" (2006) looks like it might've been made on a computer. But no, it was painted the old-fashioned way, its blue and fuchsia horizontal stripes too uneven for digital art.

Along with Louise Stern's satisfying watercolor "Entanglement" in Iona College's recent "The Female Gaze" show, "Color Painting" may be a sign that abstraction is making a comeback in our figurative, representational times.

"First Look" has already established itself as a showcase for emerging artists. Of the 15 in the initial show, nine have found their way to major galleries, says HVCCA co-founder Marc Straus.

Proving that "First Look" isn't the last.