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Works from the Dark Side

New members of AAP create bold work with ominous themes

Associated Artists of Pittsburgh: New Members Exhibition University Art Gallery, Oakland Through June 30 412.648.2400

BY ALICE WINN

Artists' associations traditionally benefit both their affiliated artists and the wider arts environment, creating new opportunities and generating confidence. Founded in 1910, the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh continues to support regional artists through exhibitions and educational outreach programs. This current show features the multimedia works of new members who joined the group between 2000 and 2003.

An impression of violence and vulnerability runs throughout some pieces. Within them, control is shown as something physical but also as something private and internal. Various aspects of this impulse to dominate and subdue animates these works.

Jennifer Bechak's installation Sleep Is Irrelevant exposes a bed made of rubber strips precisely woven over and riveted to a steel frame. Multiple imprints of heads on rough cloth pillows evince the restless trail of a long night's journey into day. Although the structure's purpose promises comfort, the materials used to create it suggest torture. The cot occupies its own psychic universe wherein fear and anger lie close to the bone, and humor is dark but pervasive. It spoofs our culture, which is based on overworking ourselves for excess overproduction. The implication is that this mania results in a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory faculties, enabling us to tolerate pain in all of our experiences. Bechak's place of unrest may serve to appease the anxiety that the work-driven feel about not laboring when they are sleeping, and supposed to be carelessly dreaming. Tossing and turning in agony on this device gives them something to do that is like an imitation of work. Bechak's piece may also be autobiographical, reflective of the contemporary artist's self-image, modeled on the new economy, as project manager, net-worker and creative insomniac. It might awaken us to the erosive risks to a culture's vitality when artists must give up a special place alongside society -- one which allows the possibility of a different way of thinking -- and instead transform themselves into another brand of energetic entrepreneur.

In Heather Powell's untitled, small-scale, mixed-media assemblage, a bed of nails is suspended above what appears to be a rack of raw meat. The tension in the composition, which sets up an encounter between two participants, one in control, the other an unwilling victim, is heightened by the uneasiness of the surfaces. They feel dense with compressed energy and, perhaps for that reason, seem to command monumental stretches of surrounding space. Here,

innocence, by the inexorable logic that governs all relational terms, suggests guilt.

Other pieces also depict vivid physicality and psychological angst motivated by an undefined source left to the viewer's speculation.

In Christine McCullough's *The Point* -- a static representation of menacing toy animals -- physical features that usually contribute to their appeal become a thin veneer over the threat of some looming attack. Her colored pencil depiction of these inanimate figures equipped with playfully wicked human expressions and gestures makes them seem sneaky and suspicious, frightening and eerie. They suggest a memory of childhood nightmares -- dreams that portend some disturbance lurking into the landscape.

In Jackie Kresak's work, trauma is staged to exacerbate a modern sense of dissociation rising from the individual's alienation within a complex society. *Blue Man 2* takes into consideration the distance between his subject's presumptive total control of self-presentation -- a hipster uniform and stance -- and our inevitable focus on where it breaks down. Within this oil portrayal, the power of the photographic image is married to a close-up artwork. A super-realistically painted tattooed youth's big face, marked by what is happening to him, contorts into a scream. Forced to compromise his cool, Kresak's character reveals himself inadvertently, perhaps just when he thought he was most protected by irony or by the most determined impassivity.

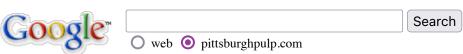
Other portraits suggest that, although none of the rules for becoming more alive is valid, it is healthy to keep on formulating them.

Christine Swann's pastel study of a pensive, self-possessed elderly woman, *No O in Luise*, *please*, becomes the affirmation of the past, the condensation of a life as seen in the character of an age-worn face.

In the Inkjet on vellum and collage work, What Is and What Will Be, Sarah Elizabeth Jones Williams investigates the complexities of identity, probing the truth of self-disclosure via a photo booth portrait with overlaid typewritten text. It builds a personal world of streams where ideas are in constant flow, where every conscious thought is in circulation and has the same value. Yet Williams' poetic journal entries also resemble prayers in that they have to do with whatever it is that makes you want more than what daily life affords. Her efforts comprise a piece that comments on itself, with the aim of making the work of art, and by analogy, our own experience, more real to us.

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