

Regional artists tackle timely issues in AAP Annual Exhibition



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In the past century, if the word Chad came up in conversation it was most likely a reference to the former French colony in Africa. The Florida ballot scandal of the 2000 presidential election changed that and chad -- as in "hanging chad" -- became a hot topic.



Robin Rombach, Post-Gazette

"Aesop," a larger-than-life oil painting by Bud Gibbons, is among the works by regional artists on display at CMU's Regina Gouger Miller Gallery.

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It's also the title of a pointed and very fine abstract painting by Joan Brechin Sonnenberg in the [Associated Artists of Pittsburgh 94th Annual Exhibition](#) at the Regina Gouger Miller Gallery, Carnegie Mellon University. Sonnenberg, a longtime AAP member, now, significantly, lives in Florida.

The technical and formal proficiency of her painting and its topicality

exemplify the best of the members' work, and there is much more to enjoy in this overall engaging, large exhibition.

Juror Renee Stout -- an accomplished artist who grew up in Pittsburgh and resides in Washington, D.C. -- did yeoman's duty narrowing more than 500 submissions to the 155 exhibited. The resultant show is a sturdy sampler of what regional artists, particularly members of this venerable organization, have to offer.

Sonnenberg wasn't the only artist to tackle timely issues, an area that so-called regional artists are often thought to avoid. Works inspired by the Iraq war include Joan Iversen Goswell's excellent, no-holds-barred artist book "Go to War for My Lies," strong digital works by Lucienne Wald, a disturbing photograph by Teresa Dalla Piccola Wood, and Aileen Zollweg's quietly mournful painting "After the Celebration."

The war wasn't the only subject of political and social commentary, some of it quite powerful. But, as with anything else, an au courant subject isn't a guarantee of success, and some of the pieces missed their marks, formally or emotionally.

Two that didn't were "Self Portrait (Smith & Wesson)" and "Soul Mirror" (silver letters blended into a mirror in a restroom, "is this me ... am i whole .. " penetrate like thoughts) by Sarah Elizabeth Jones Williams, a young new member and artist to watch.

Painting is the show's dominant medium and there are, unfortunately, far too many success stories for me to list in the space available. But they should be exciting enough to inspire a reconsideration of what constitutes this Annual.

Exhibitions as inclusive as this one, which has been the rule of late, have the advantage of offering a smorgasbord to the viewer and giving more artists an opportunity to show. But consider for a moment an exhibition of several works each -- of the caliber shown at the Miller -- by Barry Shields, Bud Gibbons, L'Ox Formidable, A.M. Schnur, Constance Merriman and Sonnenberg. Add a space for Ron Donoughe's lyrical "Winter Series" to be displayed linearly, as designed. Or a large gallery full of Nancy Kountz's elegant paintings paired with works flowing from Mary Culbertson-Stark's and Denise Suska Green's handsome new directions.

This kind of exclusivity is risk-taking and would be dependent upon a certain reciprocity in the form of, for example, increased interest from visitors, collectors and curators.

But that's often a chicken and egg discussion. As AAP refines its goal and looks to its return to the Carnegie Museum of Art in 2006, its motto might be "Build it and they will come."

The Annual continues through Aug. 1. Gallery talks will be given at 2 p.m. Saturdays by award-winning artists: today, Penny Mateer and Pat Menick; July 24, Ron Donoughe; and July 31, Carol Stremple and Ben Matthews. Hours are 11:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays. For information, call 412-268-3618.

Animal Attraction

A dozen AAP members, including some represented in the Annual Exhibition, are also showing at Fe gallery in Lawrenceville, where "Animal Attraction" is rampant.

I'm wary of themed shows because often artists become round pegs trying to fit into square holes, and the least interesting work in this exhibition is the most literally representational. But artist/gallery owner Jill Larson's selections show plenty of latitude, making for a lively range of interpretive and conceptual works.

Highlights include Teresa Rozewski's graceful bronzes that seem perched on the cusp of motion and Kenneth Beer's fabulous black and white monoprints, rich in form and texture, drawn from microscopic life. But the show's breadth encompasses much of interest, including social commentary in Jon Beckley's caged "Turtle Tale"; a plea for an endangered habitat in Constance Merriman's "Hays Woods"; and formal harmony with suggestive undertones in Elaine Morris' assembled works. And certainly no exhibition so titled would be complete without the fanciful figures that regularly populate Kathleen Zimbicki's paintings.

"Animal" continues through Aug. 6 at 4102 Butler St. Hours are noon to 4 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays. For information, call 412-860-6028.

Paul Chew Memorial

The Paul A. Chew Memorial Fund has been established to honor the legacy of the founding director of the Westmoreland Museum of American Art who died Monday. Contributions will be used for the acquisition, conservation and care of the collection and may be sent to the museum, 221 North Main St., Greensburg, 15601. For information, call 724-837-1500.

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