

LED IS FLAM

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Art in 'Exposed' isn't X-rated — what it reveals is feelings

By Chuck Twardy

BENTINEL ART CRITIC

With all America on edge about nudity in art, a show titled "Exposed" might prompt gallerygoers to brace for another battle.

But the new exhibit at Valencia Community College East Campus Gallery is about psychological, not physical, exposure. "Exposed: The Figure in Jeopardy" uses the work of four artists to subvert a central conceit of Western art — the heroic individual, triumphant over all odds.

In the figures of Grace Graupe-Pillard, Arnold Mesches, Betty Tompkins and Deborah Masters you find Prometheus bound, picked apart and forgotten — anything but transcendent. Decay, isolation and loss reign.

It's nothing new, of course. The 17th-century Dutch painters offered us the "Vanitas" still life, with a skull amid flowers and grapes reminding us of our mortality. In more recent years, Edward Hopper suffused many of his paintings — even seemingly innocent landscapes — with a sense of loneliness. Philip Guston borrowed the iconography of the comics to describe an emptiness of life. And many a forgotten neo-expressionist of the last decade flailed at canvases in order to show us how alone we are.

The four artists in "Exposed" work within the same tradition but bring more personal style to bear in their efforts than do many of their despairing contemporaries.

Particularly notable in this regard is Mesches, represented here by three compelling paintings, each with a male figure overwhelmed by a gloomy space around him. In "The Accordion Player," a man in red plays an accordion in what appears to be a vacant but opulent restaurant — a grand, vaulted space painted blue. "Three Chandeliers" presents what appears to be a bellboy, again in red, bearing two dead fowl across a dim, forest-green void that is accented by the namesake furnishings.

With loose but deft brushwork, Mesches makes the most of color combinations — the red and green of "Three Chandeliers," for instance — and spatial relationships to suggest isolation amid grandeur. It's strong work, and it would be good to see more.



'Divorce,' a bronze relief by Deborah Masters: The male figure pulls at a female clutching a child; it's a circle about to spin apart.

Art review

WHAT: "Exposed: The Figure in Jeopardy"

WHERE: Valencia Community College East Campus Gallery, 701 N. Econlockhatchee Trail, Orlando (407) 299-5000

WHEN: 1-5 p.m. Monday-Friday, through Nov. 16

ADMISSION: Free

The great sculptors of the human figure embodied human dignity in stone or metal, in images ranging from Michelangelo's "David" to Rodin's "Balzac." Tompkins reminds us that these figures are also trapped in a static existence, prone to decay. Her paintings set stone carvings in lush garden settings, thus contrasting the frozen and the fecund. At the same time, she suggests that we, too, can be like stone figures, set in rigid ways, prematurely the skull in a "Vanitas" painting.

In "Ladies of Leisure," for instance, one worm statue, prone on the ground, seems to be groping toward a crouching stone figure which turns to look back. Two live swans have drifted into the lush scene, emblematic of the vitality the stone figures have lost.

Masters' figures are sculptures. "Divorce," a bronze relief, forms a dynamic circle, with a male figure pulling at a female clutching a child; it's a circle about to spin

apart. "Justice" sets a thin, frail head, eyes shut, atop a platform supported by two crude columns.

Whereas "Divorce" seems to arrest a dynamic moment, "Justice" is like a sculpture in a Tompkins painting — static, powerless, ignored.

Graupe-Pillard paints on stiff canvas, painted black and cut out in a figure silhouette. "Scales" is a cavorting figure whose silhouette bears a depiction of several snakes and ropes. The six other paintings here by Graupe-Pillard are from the "Boy with a Gun" series. The figure is a standing profile aiming a rifle, but each bears a different pastel image. "Corporate Man" is a typical, soulless, greedy-looking yuppie of the 1980s. "Skulls," as you might assume, is the "Vanitas" image without the fruit. "Herakles" finds the Greek hero, a classical sculpture, facing the opposite direction of the figure he inhabits and about to wield a club.

In Graupe-Pillard's work we distinguish people within people, either the heroes or villains we disguise inside ourselves or those whom we affect. These are figures alone with their secrets.

This mentally and emotionally engaging show suffers only from the lack of sufficient space to contain it. As usual, it stretches from the small gallery to the lobby of the performing arts hall next door. Shows like this deserve a room worth a view.