

Broward Palm Beach Trading Places

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To get an in-a-nutshell sense of the differences and similarities between the "40th Annual Hortt Competition" and the "1998 Salon Des Refuses" exhibits, now on display at Fort Lauderdale's Museum of Art and the Broward Art Guild, respectively, consider two works, coincidentally by the same artist -- one accepted by the Hortt, the other rejected but then taken in at the Salon. Both pieces, by Eva Roffe, are paintings (one in oil, one in egg tempera) that owe an enormous stylistic debt to the surrealism of Salvador Dali. Both make use of those vast open spaces to which Dali was drawn, and both display his fanatical attention to seemingly irrelevant detail.

My Brother, the oil at the Hortt, also achieves the juxtaposition of the mundane and the bizarre that gives the best early Dalis their air of irrational terror and menace. A shirtless man in jeans sits on a sidewalk, his back to us, a few feet from a pay phone with a dangling receiver and a bird perched on the box. In the distance, we see hills, birds, a bare tree, a small chair, while in the foreground a gaping hole in the ground emits steam or smoke. The man's back is painted with such visceral immediacy that it almost seems possible to reach out and touch the fleshy, triangular crevice that appears to be taking shape at the base of his spine.

Now look at Primavera 2000 at the Salon. In the middle distance, a trio of women in gauzy attire -- the word "maidens" comes to mind -- dance in a circle. In the foreground another woman, one breast exposed, scatters flowers and coins. The overall effect is of a half-baked surrealism uneasily shoehorned into classicism, grasping for a mythological significance that eludes it.

Primavera 2000 is essentially "safe" art, reasonably well executed but without much resonance, innocuous enough to win the People's Choice award at the exhibition. My Brother, on the other hand, is art with unsettling implications, and it's all the more arresting for having brazenly -- and successfully -- appropriated elements from one of the most notorious styles in modern art history.

What's going on here? The original 1863 Salon Des Refuses, widely considered to mark the beginning of modernism, was a showcase for works deemed unsuitable for the annual Salon in the Grand Palais of Paris, arbiter of art standards of the time. Among the most notable "refuses" were works by some of the impressionists, including Manet's *Le Dejeuner Sur l'Herbe*, which had the audacity to situate classical subject matter in a contemporary context.

Now, it seems, a strange shift has taken place. Our local Salon Des Refuses has become, at least this season, a haven for art that is reluctant to challenge the status quo, much less subvert it. Primavera 2000 only seems daring. The work might have made a splash in the 1863 Salon Des Refuses, but today it's almost quaint.

The Salon does include some lovely pieces here and there among its 76 works -- T. Thomas Gilfilen's quite respectable impressionist landscape *St. Simons Twilight*, John W. Pratt III's cubist-flavored *Time Standing Still #2* -- but only a few that do anything especially daring or exciting. There are real mysteries at work, for instance, in the very large acrylic on canvas *A Slow but Fruitful Journey* by Kevin Sloan. It's a complex composition that includes gold-fringed red curtains, a vine snaking down one side, patches of brick wall, a swan, a turtle, some navel oranges, a potted plant, and an oyster shell with a pearl. But then there's a whole other composition ever so faintly, hauntingly visible behind the main image. The painting brims with a secret code waiting to be cracked.

And for sheer technical virtuosity, it would be hard to top Cleo Clark Williams' *Florida Still Life #1*, a large oil on canvas crowded with metal and cut-glass vases and dishes with fruits and flowers, set on a striped tablecloth. There's a spectacular interplay of light and color here, an overload of reflections and refractions and textures, and Williams has painted it all with a clarity and intensity that go way beyond photorealism into a sort of hallucinogenic hyperrealism.

These two pieces, and maybe two or three others, would really be more at home at this year's Hortt, which, far from being the guardian of conservative, academic style and taste, is a celebration of diversity and experimentation.

The lunatics, thank goodness, have taken control of the asylum, and the clamor of artistic voices is much more exhilarating than you might expect from an exhibition typically described with the burdensome adjective "prestigious." As the juror's statement from Thelma Golden, one of the curators of New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, puts it, "I think what I've chosen is representative of what is going on in the contemporary art world at this minute."

Not surprisingly, there's an abundance of mixed-media works in this 78-piece show, the best of which challenge the traditional boundaries separating the media they draw on. Nayda Collazo-Liorens' Land-Escape is a massive panel of paper divided into a dozen smaller panels that contain variations on the same motif of vertical lines and protozoan shapes. In front of one panel, 13 pieces of wooden stick -- three-dimensional embodiments of the lines on the paper -- hang from the ceiling like a mobile or wind chimes, casting their shadows onto the blank panel.

Gretchen Scharnagl's Cognitive Mapping I: My House goes a step further, taking what looks to be a two-dimensional canvas, unframed, and suspending it in midair to allow access from both sides, which turn out to be very different. There are autographed outlines of hands, rubbings of leaves, and figure drawings on one side, intricate stamped designs and metallic washes of color and texture on the other, all vying for attention. And, once again, a jarring element takes the image to another level: two small, irregularly shaped panes of plastic that serve as windows through the piece.

Even the show's Best in 3-D/Mixed Media award winner, an untitled installation piece by Earl Bronsteen, has its own cracked charm. It's more or less an empty cell with walls and ceiling of chainlink fence, with one video monitor planted at the open door, another on the outside of the rear wall, both showing what's being taken in by a video camera mounted in one corner of the cell. The catch is that if you're standing in front of the camera, you can't see the screens on the monitors, which face away from the cell.

Deeper into the exhibition are a couple of the Hortt's most mordantly witty works, one in mixed media, the other in oil, which comment on the relationship between the sexes. Joanna Thomas' Enduring the Inventory of His Previous Loves consists of a dozen acrylic boxes hung on a wall with thin wires. Each contains an antique black-and-white photograph of a woman, with her eyes scratched out and a small color image (a flower or insect) covering her mouth.

Kate Kretz's How to Act, Not React, When He Makes You Crazy, p. 52 is a similarly cynical take on gender politics: A woman with bloodshot eyes lies stretched out on a bed, her two cats oblivious to her misery. The image is skewed at an angle like a hastily snapped photo, but it's painted in supersaturated bright colors and bathed in an eerie yellowish light (from a TV?) that throws the details into harsh relief.

The exhibition includes an impressive array of more-traditional painting, although, again, the best examples tweak their material in one way or another. Among the group of paintings on the curved wall to the right of the gallery's entrance are **Alette Simmons-Jimenez's Boy Boy Pinguino**, a Lucian Freud-style closeup of a boy's face with, unaccountably, lots of little penguins in the background; Victoria Gitman's Variations on a Theme by Vermeer: Self-Representation #26, in which the artist puts a contemporary spin on Vermeer's famous luminosity; and Martin Oppel's wry Relative Size, which juxtaposes a realistically painted young man with an ant.

A few sculptures and a wall's worth of mostly ordinary photos are also included in the show. Given the technology available for manipulating photographic images, surprisingly few of the photographers, in particular, seem interested in pushing the envelope. And I'm completely baffled by the juror's choices for Best in Show and Best in Photography, two C-prints -- Fran Bitett Beck's Carol and Shirley and Joseph Tamargo's Valparaiso, Chile -- that are interesting but nothing more.

No matter. This year's Hortt goes a long way toward dispelling the notion that it's an elitist, aesthetically conservative show, even if it does so at the expense of the would-be maverick status of the Salon Des Refuses.

The 40th Annual Hortt Competition is on display through October 16 at the Museum of Art, 1 E. Las Olas Blvd., Fort Lauderdale, 954-525-5500. The 1998 Salon Des Refuses Exhibition is on display through October 15 at the Broward Art Guild Gallery, 530 NE 13th St., Fort Lauderdale, 954-523-4824.