Strong Women at Art Access

by SUE MARTIN on Mar 5, 2014 - 10:52 pm

The term “strong women” may conjure images of female news-headliners, those who have risen to the top of their field or achieved fame in a male-dominated arena. You know the ones: the athletes, corporate CEOs, heads of state, or entertainment celebrities. But the Strong Women in the Art Access exhibit (through March 14th), painted by five different artists, are nothing like that. They are all quite ordinary.

According to curator Sheryl Gillian, this exhibit is bound to start a conversation – in your head, with a friend, or with a complete stranger viewing the exhibit with you. What does it mean to be “strong?” How can someone so naked, so fat, so vulnerable be strong? What makes an ordinary woman, say a math teacher from the 1950s, strong? And, if you see yourself in one of these images, do you call yourself strong?

Jennifer Broschinsky’s women inhabit neat metaphorical worlds where, though they may hide...
behind masks or business suits, they cannot control the abundance of curly hair that expresses their suppressed emotions.11 They are strong because they play their roles well; they’ve figured out how to balance their own desires with the “social niceties and cultural expectations,” as Broschinsky says in her artist statement. Painted layer upon layer in acrylics, her women evoke layers of meaning: In “Fugitive”, for example, the woman with the unruly hair holds an empty birdcage as two birds fly around her. Has she set loose her children with the fear that most mothers feel in the letting-go stage of life? Or has she somehow freed her own spirit from the modest yellow costume society expects her to wear? Whatever the story, we (especially women) can identify with the strength it takes to open the door of that cage.

Terrece Beesley’s watercolor paintings depict ordinary women of the 1950s, in small town America, doing ordinary things – snowshoeing, sewing, bowling, or teaching in the home.12! Her subjects, gleaned from old photos, include her grandmother and friends as well as others from her hometown in Idaho. She notes in her artist statement, “some were widowed at an early age.” Perhaps their strength came from the way they bonded together to rebuild their lives. They smile back at the viewer without self-pity or pretense. Rather, they kick up their heels and dance, or they pause in their quilting, or pause briefly before heading into their next visiting teaching appointment, always with a grin or a steady gaze of confidence. Says Beesley, “I admired them and maybe feared them a little. At the same time I can’t resist taking a gentle jab at them.” And we smile at these retro-strong women.

Azrael Szuchay calls his part of the exhibit, “Strong Women of the Jazz Age.” He enjoys the aesthetic qualities of the 1920s and art deco era, and incorporates the period’s decorative lines and colors in his soulful portraits of women. He notes in his artist statement that the early jazz era helped women of color transcend racial and cultural limitations. No doubt women had to be strong to do it. His portraits depict that strength through bold color and determined line, while also expressing the melancholy and vulnerability of these women.13!

Carol Berrey’s paintings are mostly large in scale, but they barely contain the “bountiful flesh” of her obese female subjects.14! So accustomed are we to seeing model-thin, air-bushed women in popular media, that these unapologetically obese figures may seem ugly and shocking. But Berrey’s paintings aim to “reclaim these women and celebrate their inherent strength and beauty” (artist statement). Indeed, the curves and folds of their bodies are beautifully painted with many colors in the flesh tones. And perhaps because most of the paintings are back views, or without heads, or with the face concealed by hair, the viewer is not confronted with a gaze, challenging or vulnerable. There is one exception: in “Four Sisters,” a line-up of seated, nude women face away from the viewer, except for the last in line, who turns her head to look at us with a “I’m just fine, thank you”-kind of smile.

Sasha Gorham’s series of nude women are, in contrast to Berrey’s, angular and raw.15! This is in part Gorham’s reaction to what she considers “overly perfect images in public media.” She says in her artist statement that it is also an expression of “the anxiety I feel in relation to the world at large.” Her figures are sketchily rendered with charcoal and oil paint. She intends them to feel “unfinished, much like life is unfinished.” Their bodies are distorted and there are no heads or faces to give away more of the emotional content. Rather, the emotion comes through Gorham’s expressive drawing. There is daring in the expression and strength in the daring. This is one strong woman artist.

Whether you are a strong woman or think you know one, your whole concept of that term may expand after viewing this show.

Strong Women, a mixed-media group exhibit with Terrece Beesley, Carol Berrey, Jennifer Broschinsky, Sasha Gorham and Izrael Szuchay is at Salt Lake City’s Art Access Gallery through March 14.

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**Sue Martin**

Sue Martin holds an M.A. in Theatre and has worked in public relations. As an artist, she works in watercolor, oil, and acrylic to capture Utah landscapes or the beauty of everyday objects in still life.

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