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Artists focus on the figure, both seen and unseen *On View*

by Claudia Rousseau

A modest but remarkably compelling exhibit is at the Betty Mae Kramer Gallery and in the lobby of the Silver Spring Civic Building at Veterans Plaza in downtown Silver Spring. “Figures Seen and Unseen” explores the stated or implied presence of the human figure in the work of five local artists.

Anthony Miserendino’s drawings are the most interesting in the exhibit, and probably also the most unusual. Intrigued by objects that communicate power and religious devotion, his subjects are highly decorated weapons, armor and vestments from the 16th and 17th centuries in Western Europe. Artists frequently made drawings like these to present designs to their highly-placed patrons when commissioned to make armor or vestments, and the style and feeling in Miserendino’s works are reminiscent of such things.

As he says, his drawings are “sculptural, with dimension and weight, to represent and emphasize the object, and not to interfere with its power.”

Yet, that three-dimensionality is merely implied. Miserendino accomplishes this with meticulous and delicate renderings of the decorative elements alone, “isolated” from the substance of the objects. In this way, in a large drawing in charcoal and conté crayon of papal “Vestments,” the tiara and the upper part of a cope, imply the human figure inside them, without depicting it. Helmets and suits of decorative armor are ideal for this conjuring of the sense of the man without the representation, and Miserendino’s “Cuirass: Isolated Decoration” as well as “Display of Power” are fascinating in just this way — presence by absence.

Among the philosophical ideas generated by looking at these drawings, perhaps most interesting is the reversal of their function as presentations to men of power to a consideration of the ongoing power in the objects themselves, despite the long absence of the men who wore them.

Similarly contemplating historical and philosophical themes are Nina Chung Dwyer’s graphic and painted works that isolate and re-interpret images of the famed terracotta warriors. Created about 2,000 years ago to guard the afterlife of the first Chinese emperor, a number of these were at the National Geographic Museum in winter 2009-10, the best attended exhibit ever held at the venue. Dwyer captures the broad fascination of these sculptures, and their enduring power. Although they numbered in the hundreds, each was different, much like a real army, and their presence is uncannily strong. For the artist, they convey the “creative power of humanity in the face of death, and the timeless dedication and sacrifice of soldiers.” Dwyer’s two charcoal drawings “Preview” I and II show lines of these figures, each slightly altered. “Shards,” a study of one of the heads in different media, connotes the fragmentation of some of the terracotta bodies, paralleling what happens to real soldiers in war in all times and places.

Chris Chernow meditates on the female form — again suggesting more than actually representing — with a series of five torsos cast from real bodies in plaster and elaborated with encaustic and other materials. These are suspended on the wall, each replicating an individual woman’s body. Yet, as a group, they also seem to express a sense of universality. As if to amplify the idea of the eternal feminine implied in these sculptures, Chernow gives them titles with the names of mother goddesses, Demeter and Hera.

The stereotyping of women's roles, their place and image in society, is the theme of Nancy McNamara's monoprints with pastel, silica intaglio and collage additions. Recurring in her work is the motif of clothing without the body, as she says, the body as "memory." Three of her pieces track the day — dawn, evening and night — with three different dresses in similar red colors suspended over cutouts of scissors connoting cookie-cutter lives. In "Just a Walk," McNamara references the past as well with prints of two Greek Aphrodites stuffed into the collar of a red coat, suspended over a landscape studded with cutout figures of the prehistoric fertility fetish, the so-called "Venus of Willendorf." Here, too, then, the idea of the universal female and her historical role is implied. Katherine Janus Kahn's paintings complete the exhibit with self-portraits of varying degrees of completeness. For Kahn, painting is all about an attempt to bring herself "into focus," suggesting that she feels fragmented, but that the attempt to paint herself forces some kind of interior integration. The paintings are not pretty. Kahn's self-image is without excuse and without flattery. The rawness of the faces, in little paintings like "Kiss" and "Face," is reminiscent of Lucien Freud in their bold self-acceptance and frank description. It is definitely those smaller canvases that convey the idea of indomitability that Kahn wants most to express. She is most there when she is not fully depicted. Figures seen, and unseen, indeed.

"Figures Seen and Unseen" is open weekdays, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., through Dec. 30 at the Betty Mae Kramer Gallery, Silver Spring Civic Building, 1 Veterans Plaza, Silver Spring. Call 301-565-3805.

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