A man about 'Women about Women about Women': Here goes!

The Franciska Needham Gallery is celebrating its 20th August with a show called "Women About Women About Women." It's an admirable event in an admirable gallery. Actually, I can't think of a serious gallery in Maine that isn't admirable in one way of another, but in Needham's case the situation is a bit special.

It has a point of view that sets it apart. All galleries reflect the aesthetic biases of their owners. Needham takes things a step further. Its shows often have a political spin. They reflect the social attitudes of the proprietor. Perhaps, in the end, all galleries do this, but not as overtly and not with such purpose. You walk into the Needham, and you know where they're coming from.

It's not a matter of message over aesthetics; it's a matter of one serving the other and doing so very well.

In the past years, exhibitions have centered around war, earth matters, politics as such, social issues, even sports. Those that I have seen have been provocative, sometimes challenging.

Take the current show. Its title says it all and with emphasis. Who should review it? A woman? That would draw out attitudes, emotions and issues that by definition escape me. Didactically speaking, it would reach a more profound level, a level that its artists use to inform.

On the other hand, who needs the challenge more than I? The show should do more than confirm what women already know; it should provoke the rest of us. I am part of "us," so it's probably useful for me to tell you how "Women" has altered my insights.

If I had to narrow the event to a single work, I'd select Wendy Kindred's "Pregnant Boy: Just Like a Woman!" It's the only image in the show that is not of a woman. In it, a T-shirted teen-aged boy clutches his lower abdomen. He's not doing so in wonder or joy. He's clutching because he has discovered that he is pregnant. He is going to carry to term and has to carry on thereafter. And he's not ready for it.

Kindred is a resource in this state. Her commentaries come close to the core. Her images have fugitive edges, a device that emphasizes their metaphoric responsibilities. Her women stand for things that are more than what's apparent.

In "Be Careful What You Wish For," a woman and a reluctant pickle jar confront each other. She's going to win in a physical sense, of course. But the point is, it's her jar and her pickles. What's going to happen when the jar is opened? The forces within it are her forces, her power. Things are portentous.

See also "Woman With Tulips: You Can Have Whatever You Want." In it, a woman holding a tulip in each hand dances or twirls. Does this and "Be Careful," a painting in which a woman carries the inevitable two ice cream cones, speak solely to versatility and abundance? There's more to it. The works are clearly metaphoric and reach a layer of awareness upon which I can't participate. I know it's there, but that's as far as I can get.

I can work more easily with Katharine Cobey's constructions. She takes artifacts more often associated with the labor of men, gives them a twist and, with humor, hangs them out to dry.

Take "Throw Caution To The Wind." Its medium is 3-inch yellow plastic tapes imprinted with the word "CAUTION." You find them around construction sites. She knits and drapes them into a kind of cape, sticks the result up on a pole and offers it to the wind. It's ingenious and funny on a half-dozen levels. I could say almost the same thing about "Interviewing Medusa." Here, the medium is red "CAUTION" tapes looped around a disk of reflective mylar. We're all Medusas in this work.

S. Brennan Murphy is a silver print photographer. Her format is intimate and so is her subject matter. She may deal with herself or with women interacting in intimate physical ways. The effect is one of tenderness and affection. It is achieved through a poetic, hazy, grainy, almost vagueness that gives the work a visually light, romantic quality.

Buzz Masters' works are small collages of wax, casein and paper. They have a close intensity that, in their best moments, remind me of icons. "Slight Trace," for example, lines itself into geometric passages and then fills them with incised gold leaf, paintings of tulips and a standing classical female nude. In other collages, there are flowers, clotheslines and, again, the nude. There, the allusions are clear and beautifully presented.

Dana Moses is easier still. She is a dressmaker for the ages. Her creations are cut from corrugated tin and then painted with acrylic. She has a great sense of humor, of irony and of decoration. "It's My Party" could have been made by Matisse if he had abandoned paper for tin. It's the front of a skirt and blouse that explodes in line, color and pattern.

The most complex of all of the works in the show is "Moon Phase Arch: Many Moons" by Squidge Liljeblad Davis. It is a large, somber installation of raku-fired clay, steel and thin tree limbs. The arch is composed of ceramic plaques, some rectangular, some hemispheric. The rectangles contain hands that hold white orbs. The hemispheres conclude the arch and offer phases of the moon. At the base of each arm of the arch is a black support for the wispy limbs and for an assembly of white snakes. An egg-shaped object and a black bullet-shaped form stand under the arch.

The installation has graphic power, and its relationship to the lives of women is clear enough. It's an impressive work of art.

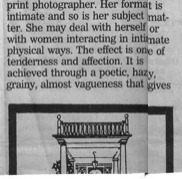
Philip Isaacson is a lawyer and arts commentator who has been writing about arts for the Telegram for 31 years.

ART REVIEW

"Women About Women About Women"
Where: Franciska Needham Gallery, Water Street, Damariscotta
When: Through Aug. 30
Hours: Tuesday through Saturday, 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.
What else: Call 563-1227.

"Woman on a Pedestal"
Oil on canvas by Wendy Kindred

"Reminiscence II"
Wax, casein, collage on paper by Buzz Masters



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