

CONNER CONTEMPORARY ART

ACADEMY 2003

Curator's Statement

Art school has historically been a place where students learn, to a large degree, by imitation. The image of the student artist with easel set up in front of the great masters may no longer be operative, but it is familiar.

In Academy 2003, you'll see obvious echoes of Japanese landscape painting in Betsy Winton's delicate abstractions; early-20th-century surrealism in Nisha Arora's photographs; and more than a little of contemporary sculptor Ron Mueck (not to mention Jake and Dinos Chapman) in Leah Sungmee Fitzkee's charmingly grotesque "Little Monsters." Maybe Marcus Morales never heard of Wim Delvoye, the Belgian conceptualist who recently built a room-size mechanical facsimile of the human digestive system that excretes what appears to be actual feces, but Morales's avian Jackson Pollocks (a trio of hard-working budgies) raise the same questions about the nature of art and the art-maker.

The art on view here represents the work of 18 artists from 10 area schools, culled from a pool of God-knows-how-many candidates (I lost count several months ago). It is, of course, representative of nothing besides my own personal taste, and maybe not even that. Issues of geographic representation, gender balance and diversity of media, along with simple physical logistics, sometimes necessitated leaving out art I would have otherwise included. While there are themes that may bubble up in some of the art--cultural and sexual identity, for instance, both of which are hard to avoid nowadays--it would be wrong to look for a single trend. Believe me, I tried. Sometimes it's hard to get the critic in me to shut up and to let the curator take over.

While I like all of the art in this show, not all of it plays well with others, which is as it should be. It is, like many survey shows, somewhat cantankerous, a quality shared, I would like to think, by the environment of the academy itself, where ideas and risks fly fast and rudely. And speaking of rude, one thing I especially like about Noah Angell and Susan Jeffries's video piece, "Stop Copying Me," is that it, in a sense, can be read as a crystallization of that difficult transition from the safety of school, where copying is not just okay but encouraged, to the dangers and rigors of the real art world, in which not just quality but originality is paramount.

This the time when the artists stop copying their betters--and in some cases each other. It is the time when we stop calling them students and start calling them artists.

Michael O'Sullivan