

Q&A Friday, March 30, 2001 A

WEEKEND PREVIEW

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VISUAL ARTS

Beyond fruits: Pens, jugs as new still lifes

By Catherine Fox
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Georgia may be the Peach State, but a surprising number of the 29 artists in the Swan Coach House Gallery's still-life exhibition have pears on the brain.

While most of them go in for straight fruit portraits, ceramic sculptor Sandy Culp finds the wit in the subject. In "Pear Lover's Companion," she gives a pear legs and a bellybutton, and — voila! — you have a wide-hipped male, replete with a well-positioned leaf.

Her riff on the venerable genre of still life isn't the only unusual approach in this pleasant, if not particularly thrilling, show. Doug Tayer crochets a colorful "Still Life With Turnover," while B.J. Adams embroiders an appealing rendition of tomatoes and a Tabasco sauce bottle lined up on a ledge. Kathy Yancy paints and collages floating objects on a pocketed old bowl in "Levitating Spoon." Eschewing the predictable fruits, vegetables and domestic objects usually found in still lifes, photographer Jenny Clifton shoots an off-kilter view of a desktop, focusing on rubber stamps, ball point pens, a container of receipts and some old snapshots.

The still life is often a vehicle for an artist to test his representational mettle. Steve Frenkel comes up a winner in that category in "Generations," a long, narrow and nostalgic graphic-and-colored-pencil image of old toys on a shelf. In traditional trompe l'oeil fashion, the tape affixing old postcards to the wall looks as if it's about to peel off into our space, and a unreeled ball of string that winds its way across the pictures looks really real.

Similarly, Bruce Hafley gets the folds of cloth and the little cricket just right in his delicate drawings. And Lu Steed does the same with the reflections in what looks to be a stainless steel pitcher filled with a profusion of colorful flowers. Plenty of artists have caught the look of still life, but not many even try to get at its soul. In a spread that's a recipe for dinner, Linda Anderson's homespun still life, which includes a cast-iron pan of corn bread and a pair of peaches, celebrates nature's bounty.

Beverly Baker takes a more ruminative turn. She sets up a group of jugs from her collection, plus a vase of pomegranates and a bloom on a railing against a background of dark sky and swirling sea. Their arrangement is rather artless, but the jugs are from various times and places — a Toby jug, a folk art face jug and so on — and have a history and, for her, a set of memories that sets in motion thoughts about the passage of time. This brings the painting into the realm of meditation on the ephemerality of living things, a subset of traditional still life.

In other words, that pear will get eaten or rot. It is immortal only by the grace of the artist's hand.



Reflecting reality: Lu Steed's painting "What's It All About, Allee?" (2001).

REVIEW

"Old Genre/New South: Perspectives on Contemporary Southern Still Life"

Through April 21, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays. Price range: \$350-\$6,000. Swan Coach House Gallery, 3130 Stonewall N.W. 404-244-2436.

The verdict: A pleasant and varied, if not inspiring, assemblage.



Flying tiger: A painted photograph, the enigmatic untitled centerpiece of Todd Murphy's exhibit, capitalizes on energy and anticipation. Murphy's painting "Zabras" (below) is also on the Love Gallery.

Todd Murphy in a natural light

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Todd Murphy was into using photographs as the basis for his paintings years before it became all the rage, but his work never looked cutting edge. Rather, the former Atlanta artist's highly charged but eternally enigmatic imagery was steeped in baroque theatricality and what one critic called "old master gloom."

It still is. Only the subject has changed. Although Murphy, who lives in Virginia, reprises past themes — the dress, Sally Hemings — in this exhibition of recent work, he devotes more canvases to animals and birds.

Indeed, you might call this exhibition, which brings together painting, sculptures and drawings, Murphy's quirky natural history museum. In the front room, two wooden cases stacked one atop the other display (head separate from body) a stuffed goose (another old subject). The large room is dominated by a monumental piece in an elaborate open cabinet, a painted photograph of a tiger practically flying through a field like an eager lover toward a young woman, who appears to be waiting patiently for him. Some of the straw that is strewn in front of the image is actually pressed behind the plexiglass.

Atypically bright and dainty, this is one of the few pieces in the show to suggest a narrative or physical energy. Most of the images are self-consciously static. A large number use photos of single birds, which, like the ostrich in one elaborately framed piece,

pose as if they were expecting John Singer Sargent to paint a society portrait. The addition of jewel colors and the spotlighted effect are the only moments of brightness in these otherwise dark pieces.

The sculptures contribute to the museum ambience. Several are composed of bones. Affirming his talent for finding new uses for found objects and his sensitivity to materials, Murphy constructs one assemblage, which looks like a pterodactyl, out of an old green kite and a long clip that looks uncannily like a beak. The artist's pitiful bird-themed drawings, the intimate flip side of the paintings, display his primitive sophistication and endearing stubby line.

Together, the works make for a striking environment, but the paintings don't hold up as individual objects. Most are almost formulaic and lacking even the tantalizing mystery of prior work. As startling as the tiger piece is, it doesn't connect emotionally.

I much prefer the strange display on the other side of the case: a teeny and crudely put together wooden bird perched on a piece of turned wood that's attached to a large tree limb. It's poignant as opposed to showy, and it seems to express something about the tenuous nature of survival. This sculpture captures some of the feeling of Murphy's 2000 High Museum sculpture exhibition and his winning 1997 show at Valentin Schwartz, both of which had more formal and thematic oomph than this one.

Those exhibitions suggested that Murphy is more gifted in the arena of drawings and sculptures. This one confirms it.



CALENDAR

ABOUT THIS CALENDAR

□ Denotes an opening.
■ Denotes a closing or a last chance.
* Indicates a recommended exhibition. Most museums charge admission; most galleries do not. For more information, please call the museum or gallery at the number listed. Information is supplied by galleries and museums and is subject to change.

Abstein Gallery. "Seasons of the Heart." A 29th-anniversary exhibit of more than 300 new works by 30 Southern artists. Through May 4, 558 14th St. N.W. 404-872-8020.

■ **Agnes Scott College.** "Book Unbound." Final day today. Dalton Gallery, McCain Library and Bradley Observatory, 141 E. College Ave., Decatur. 404-471-5361.

American Intercontinental University. "Hispanic Evolution." Works by local artists from Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico, Cuba, Ecuador, Puerto Rico, Brazil and Costa Rica. Through April 28, 1330 Peachtree Road N.E. 770-633-6687 or 404-965-5714.

■ **Arne Irwin Fine Art.** Still life paintings by Claudia Hartley, Roxanne Hillman, Mary Kathryn Massey, Marlene Ripley and others. Final day today, 55 Bennett St. N.E. 404-352-1855.

Arrow Gallery. A site-specific wall work by Didi Dunphy, from her "Modern Commencement" series of upholstered vinyl Naughtylee elements. Through April 11, 393 N. Finley St., Athens. 706-546-4398.

Artists' Atelier of Atlanta. "Krich and Geiger." Abstract expressionism. Through May 18, 800 Miami Circle N.E., Suite 200, 404-231-6999.

Artrages Gallery. Contemporary silver jewelry by Frederic Duclos. Through April 12, Vining's Jubilee, 2850 Paces Ferry Road N.W., Suite 470, 770-432-4888.



"Mascara Motel" by Susanne Selman is part of "Cream," the fifth annual Atlanta Erotic Art Show, being held under a bridge on Howell Hill Road.

Arts Clayton Gallery. "Landscapes, Vistas and Horizons." Through April 10, 106 N. McDonough St., Jonesboro. 770-473-6948.

ART SEASON. Three shows: "Gone to the Dogs" by Michael McWille; "Changing Patterns," works by five Texas fiber and metal craft artists; and the third "Member Juried Exhibition and Competition." All through April 22, 5384 Manor Drive, Stone Mountain. 770-469-1105.

ArtWalk at Lenox Square. "The Big Picture: Five Abstract Paintings." Five area artists were invited to create 4-by-10-foot abstract paintings to be placed in the five cases at ArtWalk. The artists are Heidi Coney, Ken Berlan, Woody Cornwell, Deanna Sirin and Angela Willcocks. Through June 10, 3393 Peachtree Road N.E. 404-234-6767.

Atlanta Artists Center Grandview Gallery. "The Traveling Show." Juried show of members' work. Through April 14, 2979 Grandview Ave. N.E. 404-237-2234.

Atlanta College of Art. "Parallel." Work by faculty members of Berlin's Hochschule der Künste. Dieter Appelt, Georg Baselitz, Lothar Baumgarten, Christiane Möbus and Katharina Seewering. Through April 29, Woodruff Arts Center, 1280 Peachtree St. N.E. 404-733-5050.

■ **Atlanta Contemporary Art Center.** "2001 Atlanta Biennial: When the Wind Blows." The artwork includes youth-oriented references and colorful, cartoonlike forms, with contributions by Arga, Ryan Berg, Didi Dunphy, Nicho McRay, Scott Murphy, Robin Starbuck, Angela Willcocks, Kathy Yancy and others. Opening today; reception 7 p.m.-midnight. Also tonight: "Local Salad: Georgia Music 2001," the first of three showcases of Atlanta area bands (others follow in April and May) with music by the Young Anzoues, Rock Coaches and Push Digs. 9 p.m.-midnight. Through June 2, 535 Miami St. N.W. 404-688-1970. www.thecoartcenter.org.

Atlanta Financial Center. "The Hickory Chair Series: Collage Book Illustrations" by Benny Andrews. Art created for the children's book "The Hickory Chair" by Lisa Rowe Fitzsimons. Through April 25, 3333 Peachtree Road N.E. 404-816-9777.

■ **Atlanta-Fulton Public Library.** "The Power of Self," a photography exhibit by female photographers and members of the groups Women in Focus and Sinagraply. Through Saturday, 1 Margaret Mitchell Square N.W. 404-244-2375.

■ **Atlanta International Museum.** "The Art of Neon: Science, Light & Form." Through April, Marquis II Tower, 285 Peachtree Center Ave. N.E. 404-688-3467.