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ART IN REVIEW DOUGLAS FAIRFIELD

Face to Face, Gerald Peters Gallery, 1011 Paseo de Peralta,
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"There are only two styles of portrait painting: the serious and the smirk," wrote Charles Dickens in *Nicholas Nickleby*. In *Face To Face* -- currently on view at Gerald Peters Gallery -- there are a lot of both and then some. In 52 artworks by 29 artists, *Face to Face* has a bit of everything in terms of media, techniques, and personae. Paintings,

drawings, prints, photography, mixed media, and sculpture occupy the foyer, the main exhibit space, and a small anteroom. From those who appreciate realism to those partial to conceptual fare, viewers will find much to consider in 32 images of women, 17 male figures, and three works in which gender is up for grabs.

Some big names in the art world are represented in this thematic exhibit, including Magdalena Abakanowicz, Chuck Close, Nan Goldin, Robert Graham, Jenny Holzer with Michael Glier, David Hockney, and Andy Warhol; but fame doesn't necessarily make for the best work. The most intriguing, if not the most unsettling and sorrowful image in the show, is *Josephine*, a color photograph by Alexandra Strada. In a matter-of-fact snapshot mode with a raised perspective, Strada's image features an elderly woman with a faraway gaze sitting on a sofa in a seemingly barren room with putty-colored walls. The back of the sofa runs the width of the composition like a low horizon line, and the woman's head -- the portrait is cropped at the shoulders -- serves as a conduit from sofa to wall, guiding our attention to a framed picture of a full-rigged sailing vessel at sea. The darkish seascape -- positioned unusually high on the expanse of blank wall -- seems to be suspended in a void and may be seen like a cartoon bubble above the woman's head, conveying a thought or a state of mind. The visual symbol of a lost soul or a person alone is sobering. Has this woman been institutionalized by her family? Is she a widow? Does she suffer from Alzheimer's? Aging is not a pretty picture, but Strada's image is a powerful statement on the human condition.

Another image of blank stares -- with looks that go right through you -- is *Happy Hour*, a painting by Michael Viera. Executed in a style reminiscent of 16th-century Dutch portraiture -- subdued in palette and sparse in subject matter -- Viera presents two women dressed in blue sack dresses sitting next to each other on what appears to be a church pew. The room is entirely dark, except for the illuminated faces of the two women, who may be related by blood or sacred vows. The title --

a misnomer if ever there was one -- is a wink of the artist's dry humor. Viera's women may, indeed, be sitting in a tavern waiting for their

pints of ale, but the ambience of the place is given more to reverent convocation than riotous chug-a-lug.

The one painting to which I returned again and again was *Dog Boy* by John Mellencamp -- yes, that John Mellencamp, the singer/songwriter. A lone, elongated figure of a young black man dressed in a

multicolored sweatshirt and slacks stands before a white wall and stares out, seemingly with something to say. Although the kid is looking directly at you,

he's nonthreatening and appears to be unsure of himself or simply shy.

His ungainly proportions broadcast the awkwardness -- and endearing

quality -- of adolescence. The smallish head with one skewed ear feels even smaller near his extended torso and even longer arms that sport enormous hands. Painted in such a way that resembles the ragtag ensemble of kids' clothing, Mellencamp's technique is loose and given

to glancing impression rather than precision.

Why Chuck Close is portrayed in this show three times -- twice by other artists and once in a self-portrait -- is a mystery. (He's hardly a screen idol.) But the artist's black-and-white etching of himself -- done in his signature style of pieced-together miniature abstractions -- is a gem. Imagine the blackest black you've ever seen, and it still won't match the inky, deep blacks in Close's print. Portrait #38 (Topless Chuck) by **Brenda Zlamany** features Close standing in a frontal half-length pose with his arms folded just below the chest. He's adorned with only a pair of wire-rimmed glasses and a wristwatch -- the bright face of which serves as a nice visual punctuation point. Zlamany's application of low impasto is impressive, as is her realistic rendition of the figure softly illuminated by raking light.

Lovers of true trompe l'oeil -- that which can fool the eye -- should not miss Marc Sijan's sculpture made of polyester resin, oil, and assorted accouterments. Identifying it by title will spoil the surprise, as well as the fun you'll have being duped -- as were yours truly, my wife, a friend, and four others meandering through the exhibit at the time.

Every piece in a group show can't be a winner, and there are a few that disappoint -- either the artist has tried too hard to entertain, the symbolism is overwrought, or the work doesn't warrant a second look. Victoria Carlson's two pieces -- David Solomon and Viv and the Bomber -- are hardly more than slapstick one-liners. They're funny and well executed, but where does one go from there? Each of Wyatt Neumann's triad of color photos of young, enterprising women is too stagy. And David Gamble's two like-but-unlike silkscreens of artist Damien Hirst sticking his tongue out cry loudly to be chic, cool, and contemporary. His appropriation of Warhol's Fauvist color schemes and Lichtenstein's Benday dot shtick is too obvious.

Aside from the pieces that should have been left in storage, Face to Face is a terrific show and a great learning tool, particularly for a studio class devoted to the figure. The great Austrian artist Oskar Kokoschka once said: "The life of the soul is expressed by man in his art. ...The mystery of the soul is like that of a closed door. When you open it, you see something which was not there before." Face to Face opens myriad doors.

-- Douglas Fairfield