



Posted on Thu, Dec. 09, 2010

These portraits are more than skin deep

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Special to The Star

The idea of a traditional portrait is to create an idealized permanent presence of the sitter, rendering him or her forever present. Most of the artists in "Familiar: Portraits of Proximity" dismantle the tradition, underlining the impermanence, uncertainty and peculiarities of their subjects and, ultimately, of themselves.

Eight artists, four of them — Miki Baird, Gloria Baker Feinstein, Maryellen Munger and Adolfo Martinez — based in Kansas City, offer an agreeable portrait overview that includes ceramics, photography, painting, video and simple ink on paper drawings.

Drawings in the series "Suburbia," by Tennessee resident and Kansas City Art Institute graduate Jessica Wohl, are a "Where's Waldo" of subversive domesticity in which seditious figures are buried within the image.

Dogs mate in a treetop, mortar oozes creepily from a low stone wall, and families wear drug- and alcohol-monitoring ankle bracelets, suggesting the unraveling of seemingly stable suburbia and its denizens.

Wohl meticulously renders the drawings in crisp black ink on white paper. Her tight precision paradoxically augments the unsettling imagery in these portraits of strangeness.

Feinstein's 2005 photographic series of identical twins titled "Space Between" suggests the uncanny relationship between genetically identical people. Feinstein underlines the mystery that identical twins embody. They seem knowable, in their matching clothes and poses, and yet also deeply unfathomable.

Baird's intricate installations straddle photography and design, punctuated by longing. Surreptitiously photographing strangers, she blurs and abstracts their faces, prints hundreds of the small images and then creates sculptural pieces.

Baird trades on the complicated mysteries of desire; the closer we look at her tiny photos to see the images, the less clear they become.

Her most spectacular work, "Zip ... Unzip ... Altered Recollections," snakes across the gallery floor, changing directions, patterns and gestures. Using photographs taken over a three-year period, Baird creates a physical and metaphorical topography of remembered, forgotten and unknown portraits.

Munger's explorations into the grotesque differ sharply from the bland, predictable National Geographic-like photos by Los Angelino Norman Jacobson. Munger's rough ceramic busts present the self and others as ghoulish ciphers, as if crafted from our dark insides looking out.

In Martinez's painting "My Dad's Chair," the empty chair stands in for Martinez's father. Looming large and powerful, the chair is a touching image for the father diminished by dementia.

The artists in "Familiar: Portraits of Proximity" suggest that a complex visual language of presence, of here and now, no matter how fleeting and illusory, emerges out of the impulse to record a portrait of a person or the phantom traces left behind.

on display

"Familiar: Portraits of Proximity" continues at the Kansas City Jewish Museum of Contemporary Art, Epstein Gallery, 5500 W. 123rd St., Overland Park, through Jan. 9. Hours are 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 1-4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. For more information, call 913-266-8413.