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ART

Queering the Biennial

It's the same old same old
at Portland Art Museum's
Oregon showcase—save for two

BY GARY MORRIS

Portland Art Museum isn't necessarily known as a haven of radical art. Respectability is the byword here, with emphasis on dusty textbook classics or art that was new decades ago.

Occasionally, though, PAM's curators throw a bone to the arguably avant-garde. Such is the case with the museum's Oregon Biennial. This every-other-year event showcases recent art by Oregonians, which is supposed to at least flirt with the cutting edge.

Unfortunately, there's very little flirting and not much edge in this year's show. As several observers have noted, a more accurate title would be the Portland Biennial, given that the vast majority of artists are from this area. The Predictable Portland Biennial That Includes Paintings and Photography and a Couple of Assemblages But No Sculpture or Video would be an even better name. Expect the expected this go-round.

Fortunately, though, two artists—one a straight photographer creating tantalizing large-format images of male nudes, the other a queer painter memorializing a love affair between two male Chihuahuas—bring some much-needed power and whimsy to this otherwise tired affair.

Erik Palmer's two large photographs on canvas are part of his series called *Bang Comics!* His previous work documenting Oregon Ballet Theatre must have prepared him for this more mature, wonderfully evocative project.

Palmer's subjects are abstracted, sardonic "superheroes." The two examples in the show are titled "Superman Number One Hundred and Three" and "The Power of Warlock."

"Nearly all of the images in the series are made using a camera that sits at a fixed location and fires at a specific interval...or using a wireless remote control," explains Palmer. "So the intentionality of the photography is really involved in arranging a bit of choreography or performance in front of the camera rather than pointing the camera and making a decision."

These "choreographed" subjects are two friends of the photographer, shot in the woods sans capes and masks but re-endowed with a different kind of power as they are caught, frozen, in balletic-heroic poses.

The Portlander's work has been compared to award-winning New York photographer Richard Avedon's, but there's an obvious, dramatic difference: His subjects are not celebrities; they're ordinary people made at once larger than life and vulnerable. They exist as both physical and abstract creations—strikingly athletic figures shot against a woodland backdrop that dissolves into splendid, transporting patterns of light and shadow.

Palmer credits Avedon and Hungarian-born fashion photographer Martin Munkacsi, along with painters Egon Schiele and Amedeo

Modigliani—no surprise given the painterly quality of these images.

Moving from the sublime to the funky fringe, Cynthia Star is represented by three paintings from a series of seven called *Boys Will Be Boys*. Star's "boys" are two Chihuahuas of the artist's acquaintance, Pee Wee and Tyco.

The images are at once kitschy, whimsical and vaguely unsettling—reminiscent of outsider art in their portrayal of tiny, nervous dogs with big hard-ons giddily humping each other.

In one painting, a stimulated Pee Wee looks grim as Tyco attempts to have his way with him; in another, both pooches appear in the apex of ecstasy as passion overtakes them. Another shows a third, female dog (a Maltese named Gabby) who, standing alone with string on her head, appears outside the antics of Pee Wee and Tyco in every sense—perhaps a lonesome fag hag to her horny canine queens. (Star more or



Erik Palmer's images call to the homo erectus in us all



Cynthia Star: kitschy, whimsical, vaguely unsettling



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

less verifies this in her artist's statement, calling poor Gabby "the wallflower at their party.")

Maybe these images can reignite the debate about animal analogues for human homosexuality. After all, if Pee Wee and Tyco are doing it, it must be natural. Or maybe they're just wacky tableaux.

Star says she originally had no intention of painting these particular subjects. "I went into the studio with the intent to paint riot cops," after a bad experience with three at a President Bush protest. Instead, she painted Gabby, then the other two. "The dogs took my mind completely off the riot cops."

Reaction to these literal horndogs has been varied, according to the artist, from embarrassment to "whispered compliments" to prudish discomfort.

But are the dogs really gay? "Well, Tyco has always reminded me of Truman Capote," muses Star. "These dogs are very queer. They live with a girl Chihuahua and don't include her in their games. Pee Wee and Tyco's displays of affection are about getting attention from the humans. Their approach to attention-getting is very free and self-satisfying, whereas Gabby's solo approach seems to make her worried and confused. If I were to translate this to the human world, embracing one's queerness and being true to oneself creates a charismatic confidence, overcoming prejudice by having an irresistibly good time!"

That's what we thought. 

Portland Art Museum's OREGON BIENNIAL exhibit runs through Sept. 7 at 1219 S.W. Park Ave.

GARY MORRIS is a Portland free-lance writer.