

# Figuratively Speaking

Local galleries showcase the human form.

**T**he human figure is the focus of two current exhibitions. *The Figure* at Alder Art Gallery features 30 local artists rendering the human form in a variety of two- and three-dimensional media. Meanwhile, at the Maude Kerns Art Center, *Figuratively Speaking II* showcases paintings and drawings by 12 artists who participate in the center's tradition of open studios where artists work from live models.

The two exhibits overlap, with some artists showing their works in both, and also complement each other. There are no three-dimensional works at MKAC but the center makes up for the scarcity of two-dimensional nudes at Alder Gallery.

The sculptures at Alder Gallery exhibit a fair range of styles. **Ellen Tykeson** has lovely understanding of female anatomy, whether

she depicts slender childhood (*Journey*), a young maiden's pastoral innocence (*Reflection*), a jolly romp of voluptuous bodies (*Music of the Spheres*) or a self-possessed woman (*Fitzgerald Nude* — the one piece not affected by a certain nostalgia or hankering after a mythic state of innocence). In contrast, **Jerry Williams'** *Cain & Abel* exhibits the raw energy of form emerging out of clay.

In *Challenger*, **Justin Poole** goes for a classic rendering of the female form. The stance is dynamic but the composition conventional. No one can doubt **Steve Reinmuth's** craftsmanship and control over form. However, his stylizations of the human figure (*Ascent*, *Icarus Christ*), depicting streamlined, overmuscular male superheroes perched atop pedestals not unlike Soviet mausoleums, are alas not camp at all and send an unfortunate overtone of male totalitarianism. I much prefer the resonant simplicity of his gongs.

**Jud Turner's** stylized life-size figures are great fun (*Seated Figure*, *Cat*, *Dollar Man*), although the smaller *Standing Figure* and *Ledge Man* are less successful and more derivative (think Giacometti).

A little surprisingly, most paintings at Alder Gallery are of clad figures as opposed to nudes. Much of the portraiture is conventional, and in **John Van Dreal's** *Dancing under the Moon*, sentimentality mars considerable skill. In such a context, two artists stand out: **Madeleine Liepe's** gouache, *Artist & His Friends*, is refreshing for its display of individual fantasy, and **Mike Van's** four paintings for their delightful wit and humor.

Far from being gratuitous, the playfulness in Van's pieces doubles as commentary upon formal elements inherent to painting: issues of form, value, contrast, composition, line vs. plane, and various spatial conventions are raised, illustrated, or flaunted so as to bring them to our attention.

Prominent among the works painted from life are **Sarkis Antikajian's** oils, which

appear in both shows. Antikajian paints with great facility — perhaps dangerously so — capturing in quick bold decisive strokes and equally bold colors his sitter's expressive likeness, body language and mood. Antikajian's dynamic way of applying paint creates an interesting tension with his subjects' immobility.

In contrast, **Mark Clarke's** approach in the portraits further emphasizes the models' stillness: The paint is applied smoothly and the rich, splendid tones blend into one another. With their pensive expression, and against a background of abstract architectural planes that intensifies the impression of their solitariness, Clarke's figures appear locked in their own world. These portraits carry an emotional charge no less strong for being contained.

Such contrasts in mood and interpretation of identical raw data are part of the appeal of the MKAC exhibit. Another — and concurrent — appeal is that many of the artists in the show do not shrink from the naked human form, an endlessly fascinating and challenging object of aesthetic scrutiny since the earliest beginnings of art.

For some of these artists, drawing from life is rooted in the discipline of observation, which, says **Marsha Wells**, requires discarding "memory, preconceptions, or assumptions about how the body should appear." Hence Wells' predilection for foreshortened poses, which oblige her to "really look." Line is alive in her conté crayon studies of the human body viewed from unusual angles. Her work appears at both exhibits.

**Don Gardner's** watercolors, similarly based on observation, are particularly sensitive. With a light touch and subtle palette, Gardner created delicate renderings of massive bodies that are full of life and character. His portraits are similarly expressive, conveying individuality, mood and emotion through light suggestive lines and applications of color.

For *Benjamin Nursing*, a graphite drawing, **Helen Liu** held her son in her right arm and drew with her non-dominant

left hand to shut out her "analytical left brain." The result is a lovely portrayal of her child's legs that is alive from its multiple, tentative line tracings and moving because what it captures is so true.

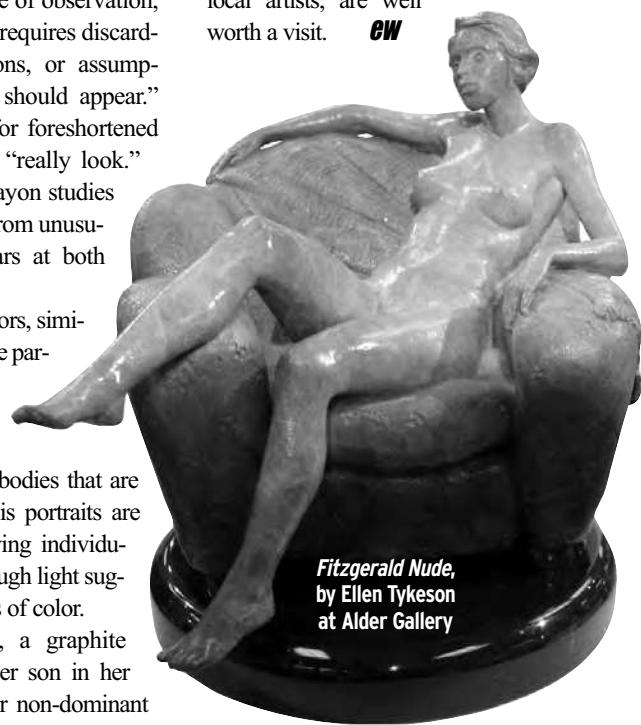
Other artists prefer to use models as a more casual reference. "It's not my intention to copy what I see," explained **Howard Houseknecht**. His ink-and-pastel nudes therefore take after each other rather than after a model. They also have an unmistakable Picasso look. "Picasso, as far as line goes, is a huge influence," Houseknecht said. "He's my teacher." Houseknecht's figures are typed — this is the danger when one reproduces a style rather than what one observes — but his sensuous, flowing lines are definitely appealing as is his sense of composition.

Meanwhile, **Thomas Rubick** takes far more cues from observation than Houseknecht so that his nudes are more individualistic, but he takes liberties with reality and creates distortions that add an expressive quality to his watercolors and gouaches. This approach is particularly successful in *Red Girl* and *Red Girl I*.

These two exhibits, both exclusively of local artists, are well worth a visit. **EW**



*Male Figure II*, watercolor by Don Gardner at MKAC



*Fitzgerald Nude*, by Ellen Tykeson at Alder Gallery

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