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Body images

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Albuquerque artists explore the human form and its relationships

By Melody Mork

As artists search for meaning in the world around them, many express themselves by exploring the human figure. We're drawn to the human figure because that's who we are; we can't understand the fundamentals of art such as line, texture, form without first seeing them in ourselves. Humanity adds an emotional layer that we can all relate to, each in our own way.

Some artists use their canvases to set up elaborate narratives; others are just fascinated with the body itself. Figures interact with each other, with the landscape, or with a staged set created by the artist. Some are elaborate and dramatic; others are introspective and solitary.

A number of Albuquerque painters focus on the human figure in their work. With the thick strokes of a palette knife or the whisper of a tiny paintbrush, each of these artists captures humanity in an intriguing way. Whether intellectual, political or personal, they all strive for an emotional response by using the human body in their work.

For the past ten years, Juliana Coles has been traveling around the country and beyond, teaching people a form of self expression that she calls "Extreme Journaling." She encourages her students to dig deep within themselves in "an experiment in self portraiture that captures a moment in time where freedom of expression is utmost."

People stretch, reach, and dance across her surfaces, questioning, floating, or just being. From small-scale sketches on the pages of her journals to large expressive paintings on board or paper, her figures have an emotional intensity brought forth through her bold lines and colors. "Each person has to find an emotional center in themselves and find meaning in the world around them," she says.



Jennifer Nehrbass, "Across From the Prison Beside the Great Lake"

Although her style and method are much different, Jennifer Nehrbass' paintings are also a process of examination, some personal while others are more societal. Through a system of photographic portraits, computer-generated images and gridded mockups, she paints large canvases that address the psychology of women as she dismantles the roles and stereotypes of beauty and femininity. "Specifically I focus on the anxiety created when there is a divide between what women own and who they are. I examine the psychology that leads women to go to extremes to maintain beauty and style," she says.

She is often her own subject; she draws on her background in fashion design when creating her scenes. In her new work, she combines abstract surfaces with photorealism, superimposing a fashionable figure over a background of fragmented strokes.

Over the past several years, Iva Morris has been working on a series of paintings "that deal with both cultural expectations, life's certainties and their visual counterparts." Using her family and friends as models, she draws on her own experience as a wife,

mother and artist to provoke discussion about gender stereotypes and women's roles today.

"Women service and facilitate the constant flow of family life while whole segments of their particular experiences and chapters of condition are forgotten and blur with time," she says. Painting in a realistic manner, she feels that "the best way to communicate my message is to hold up a mirror image of humanity for viewing."

Morris' husband Brian O'Connor also uses figures in elaborate tableaux. "The characters that emerge from my canvases are vessels from which the sociopolitical narrative flows." He says that he starts his paintings with "little more than a general topic in mind and a pile of visual reference material. As the paint builds up



Marc Oulette, "Storm"



Juliana Coles, "The Wolves"

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Brian O'Connor, "Flagship"

on the surface, the characters and the space begin to take shape."

In colorful, imaginative scenes, Laura Wacha's figures spin and float across her canvasses, interconnected but seldom overlapping. Her characters fit together like puzzle pieces, packing the space. Her paintings have a narrative, but not necessarily a story.



Iva Morris, "Birds of a Feather"

"They're possibilities for stories – I want them to be ambiguous," the artist explains. "Sometimes they're something I want to think about, but I forget about them after they're done."

They all have figures in them, but they're not always human – "sometimes they're alien or animal," Wacha says. Every inch of her canvas seems to be filled with characters who balance, juggle, poke, stare, and interact with each other in crazy allegories relating to politics, motherhood, responsibilities, and whatever else happens to be the theme of her day. Look for her show, "Fifty," opening in May at Matrix Fine Art.



Laura Wacha, "Edge of Nowhere"



By Travis Black

Several artists talk about what lies

beneath the skin – "emotion, spirit, life force, and individual's history, chemicals and so on. The goal for me was to capture all that simultaneously, using the packaging of the human and pulling in abstract elements to point to the non-rational and subjective aspects of who we are," says Travis Black.

His colorful figures gaze at the viewer with the hint of a smile, often portrayed with a bird in his new "Chirp" series, where the "figure is now the viewer and all the floating particulates and abstraction are the celebration horns and percussion of our experience of and joy of observing and being part of nature."

Painter Leo Neufeld says that portraiture allows him to connect with people. When painting, he and his subject "become one and bond with each other. To many artists, the subject is incidental, but to me the figure becomes the script – they define what it is that I'm painting."

He says that he never knows what he's getting into when he paints a portrait. "Intimacy is a profound thing. The challenge is to catch the human spirit – that's what makes it intriguing."



Leo Neufeld, "Tera"



Andres Orlowski, "4 Study"

To Andres Orlowski, sometimes the figure is the subject itself; other times "it is an element of the concept or metaphor, either social or personal. For me, it's an intentional and internal choice to interpret the figure in a realistic manner, even when the painting has elements of allegory and surrealism."

Mark Horst says he loves the body – "Its amazing shapes and angles, its awkwardness, its energy, its endlessly fascinating changes from youth to old age. Every bit of that is beautiful."

He paints his figures with broad, angled brushstrokes with an often dusky palette, suggesting tension and emotions below the surface. In his

current body of work, he is painting victims of violent crime, using photos of dead people.

"The amazing thing about painting these people is that there's always a point when they look back at me: and then I know the painting is done," Horst says.



By Mark Horst

Marc Oulette is interested initially in the composition and form of the figure – "Shape and weight and sometimes movement," he says.

Oulette's figures, painted with a pastry knife, are often solitary men who go about their business without noticing the audience.

He often depicts anonymous individuals. "I like the sense of intimacy while at the same time, detachment. We see strangers everyday. I sometimes paint those people doing their lives. It can be mundane activity, like walking, but humans are always interesting," he says.



Mark Ouellette, "Two Men"

Cedra Wood uses a tiny paintbrush to create her small paintings, intricate in



Cedra Wood, "Spectable," acrylic on panel.

composition and content. Not only does she tell stories through her paintings; she also paints the psychological

distance between people.

"Where there is a human figure, there is a character; and where there is a character, there is a story. To paint a person is to create a hundred narratives, since every viewer brings their own associations and assumptions and sympathies to the image," she says. "A lot of my work is about the distance between people, and the way that we relate to each other, and to the environments in which we find ourselves – what better way to do that than to literally depict people?"

–Melody Mock is a contributing editor to abqARTS.

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