

Edgy and provocative 'Cream' show, at Arts Benicia, singles out the best of Bay Area's fine arts master's grads

By Richard Bammer
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It never fails to engage, always promises several surprises, and occasionally flabbergasts, causing a viewer to wonder, "How'd they do that?"

In its sixth year, "Cream — from the top" is Arts Benicia Center Gallery's annual show of works by some of the best artists to emerge from top Bay Area fine arts graduate programs, from the California College of the Arts to Stanford University. Curated by longtime gallery director Kathryn Weller-Renfrow, the 2007 exhibit is a collection of more than 30 pieces by 17 artists.

Not every "Cream" show has merited raves, for Weller-Renfrow's generally laudable sense of taste may not match everyone's definition of art in the 21st century. But her newest organizing effort, through Aug. 26, ranks with the exciting best of her past collections.

As she often does, Weller-Renfrow places some of the show's most provocative works just inside the entrance to the gallery, a white-

walled, converted weapons storehouse, now a commercial gallery at the former Benicia Arsenal on Tyler Street.

Perhaps the most striking work in the show, Dan Lydersen's "Little Lamb" is a 4-by-3-foot oil on canvas that is not only a parody of Old Master portraiture but also an obvious indictment on President Bush's war and diplomatic policies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The artist, a graduate of the San Francisco Art Institute, depicts a somewhat cherubic-looking young male child in a white dress, with blue ribbons at the hem and near its bow-tied collar. The boy is standing next to three lambs and a slaughtered one in the foreground near his feet. In keeping with the Renaissance parody, there is a receding landscape in the background, with ranch buildings, another slaughtered lamb carcass and a sports stadium (Bush was a former co-owner of the Texas Rangers baseball team) on the distant horizon, underneath stratified cirrus clouds against a bright blue sky. Redheaded, the boy wears

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what looks like one of those goofy, oversized rubber hats that baseball and football fans buy at stadium concessions. In his left hand is a blue plastic toy gun; in his right an oversized blue rubber hand with the index finger indicating "No. 1," another sports reference but also one implying America's perceived place as a military and economic power in the world.

A viewer might laugh, cringe and feel outrage all at the same time while looking at this Lydersen work and the one next to it, "Annunciation," another parody of a classic Renaissance painting scene and simultaneous comment on the Catholic Church's stance on abortion.

But what is art's purpose, if not to shock us from time to time, to give rise to outrage, to rock us back on our comfortable, complacent heels, so we can see our world in another light, as metaphor, welcome or not, so often does?

Other exhibit highlights include two works by fellow Art Institute graduate Robert Burden, each 7-foot-tall oil paintings of action figure toys. One, "Playmates' Foot Soldier," looks like a cross between a distant relative of a Transformer and a malevolent character from one of filmmaker George Lucas' "Star Wars" films. The soldier is outfitted with fantastically sized protective padding and footgear, set against, oddly, a burnished gold background with white daisy florettes. Next to "Playmates'" is Burden's "DC/Kenner's Penguin," a character from the comic book series.

Equally spectacular are Karen Olsen-Dunn's two digitized pigment paintings, at nearly 4 by 8 feet each, based on Botticelli's "The Story of Nastagio degli Onesti." The overall effect is an impression of classic images pixelated, a sort of modern updating of Lichtenstein's Benday dot paintings in the 1960s and

'70s. The scene depicted in one, which requires a little squinting to make out, is reminiscent of a Renaissance feast, with court jesters and dogs in the foreground and wealthy patrons seated at a background table and a mounted, sword-wielding knight, at right, chasing a woman.

Mills College graduate Ginelle Hustrulid created a four-minute silent digital video projection, "Eleven," that shows images of hands, legs and feet in dressed and undressed modes. It is a statement of sorts on body language — or perhaps body parts that reveal so much about us, if we take the time to look closely.

A couple of artists seemed to stretch the limits of art by posing the question "Is it photography or painting?" and commenting on both art forms in the process.

Weller-Renfrow selected three digital C-prints (a type of large-format photography) by Emily Mcleod, a San Francisco State University graduate. At nearly 3 feet each, they show a middle-class suburban home at night in soft focus at the borders, reminding a viewer of paintings by Bay Area artist Robert Bechtle or German artist Gerhard Richter.

Oil painter Edmund Wyss, yet another Art Institute graduate, meticulously depicted images of weapons, bullets and part of a Leica camera. All of them could be easily mistaken for a photograph, even observed close up.

In the tradition of Bay Area Figurative art, Jenny Zito a graduate of the California College of the Arts, shows off four of her thickly painted domestic scenes, recalling the gooey, tactile qualities of Northern California pop artists Wayne Thiebaud and Richard Diebenkorn.

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