

Classy Kewpies

All Dolled Up at J. Crist

BW • November 11 - 17, 1999 • 27

The usual trip to an art gallery entails looking at paintings or sculptures, or maybe something high-tech like a video installation. Rarely is a gallery exhibit devoted to the subject that the J. Crist Gallery now has on display—dolls. These are not your typical Barbie and Betsy-Wetsy. These dolls and images of dolls are objects of fine art and display exceptional craftsmanship.

The show boasts 11 artists, from Idaho and around the country. Some of the artists produced works just for this particular show. Others are actually doll makers by trade. One such doll maker, Nancy Wiley, is one of the best known and most collected in the country.

Wiley displays some of the most elaborate dolls at J. Crist. The large "Spider Lady" expands on the idea of the black widow. Dressed in a lacy black gown with a black veil, the haggard old woman is bent over with the weight of many years. Only on further inspection does the viewer notice the eight arachnid legs protruding from her back. The small red pin on her breast reveals her dark secret, too.

Two other examples of Wiley's work

attest to her obsession with detailed costuming. "Tree Lady," with her wild coif of leaves and gnarled twiggy fingers, is like some nightmarish fairy tale. "Lobster Lady" is a regal countess. She has claws and a bright red tail but a distinct air of magnificence. As you might guess, Wiley has a penchant for "theme" dolls.

Another take on the theme is the work of Mikey Walsh. These dolls are reminiscent of old china dolls in construction—ceramic heads and appendages with sewn cloth bodies. Yet, the texture of the ceramic is rough, making the dolls seem like ancient artifacts. Adding to that feeling is their tendency to be unclothed. A few of these have life-like glass eyes that inspire quite an unsettling sensation in viewers.

I've touched on just some of the types of dolls on display. There is no room to discuss the unique qualities of all the dolls at J. Crist—a wondrous collection embodying unusual styles and materials. Do yourself a favor and see this fine show (up until Nov. 19). I only wish that J. Crist had some more space to display. They did a superb job with the space they have.

—Tyrus Clutter

More than Meets the Eye

22 January 20 - 26, 2000 • BW

The Multilayered Work of David Airhart

While Boise remains a mystery to many outside of Idaho, some who have moved away from the city to expand careers are helping to make a good name for this "City of Trees." One such person is the painter David Airhart, now of Portland.

Many may be somewhat familiar with Airhart's work; he has a painting on permanent display at the BAM. Idahoans also have the opportunity to see his work by visiting his local representative, Stewart Gallery on Main.

The most recent exhibition at Stewart featured works completed in the second half of the '90s, some on loan from private collections. All pieces were acrylic on masonite with Airhart's distinctive frames. The technique is a mixture of watery-thin glazes and dryish scumbling, revealing minute details through many layers, which form the subtle end result. The detail is almost maddening on some pieces considering that larger ones can be near 4 x 6 feet.

In addition to the technique, the style of these figurative works is also constant. Airhart's work may remind you of the very solid figures of the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. Both artists tend to create figures whose facial features are based on a set design. Even when Airhart's figures are of differing ethnicities, they seem related in a familial way. This allows observers to view the body of work as more than individual works—they reveal the soul of the artist.

"Shirts and Skins, Nike's Dance" is composed in a classical style. The muscular figures could be from a Renaissance painting but for the fact that they are vying for the ball in backyard

game of hoops. The battle is equal to that of some classical work where gods and men contend with one another.

Here we sense this as a tiny white blimp looks down on the game, giving it the monumental feeling of the something much more important. The frame adds a touch of fun as it is made with the orange pimpled covering of a basketball.

Airhart's frames often integrate some aspect of the enclosed painting. His piece, "Championship of the Universe" (at BAM), also touches on this basketball theme. Here the frame is just as integral—the frame is the wood from a basketball court. Airhart used actual basketball flooring obtained from a local Boise school that was tearing up its old floor.

A unique work recently seen at Stewart presented some problems for viewers. "Oregon Territory" featured the back view of a man standing before a harbor with a large freighter. The man is urinating on a rock in the water. At the opening reception it was fun to watch the inner struggle of people as they walked past this piece. It was obvious that each wanted to look but was somewhat uncomfortable intruding upon this private moment.

Other works, such as "Winter of '96," hinted at more hidden and personal meanings. A man in chest high floodwaters, with an umbrella in hand, plods through his yard as his wife watches from the second floor of their drowned house. Some unseen thing is bubbling up in front of him from beneath the water's surface. The unseen is the key to this show—each piece has more below the surface.

—Tyrus Clutter