

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Artists consider human form's simple beauty

A group of charcoal drawings of the female figure by Martin Slater is on view at Creative Partners in Bethesda. At the same time, a series of photos of the female nude by Michael Ian Goulding form part of the

On View

CLAUDIA ROUSSEAU

three-person exhibit at the Glenview Mansion Art Gallery in Rockville.

Although one can't imagine that it was planned, the two exhibits are uncannily parallel in intent, if not exactly in aesthetics. The fact that the former are exclusively in black chalk, with white highlights, and the latter are silver gelatin prints, with their deep blacks and bright whites, links the two exhibits, although each artist's interest in the female form is approached from a very different corner.

Slater's drawings are avowedly academic. A microbiologist at the National Institutes of Health for most of his working career, Slater has dedicated himself to realizing his lifelong interest in drawing since his retirement in 2001. However, apart from courses at Montgomery College and the Torpedo Factory taken over the years, he is self-trained. As a youth interested in science, the artist began by copying book covers and illustrations; later on, he made drawings from photographs of people. Ultimately, the drawings of the female figure by the early 19th century French Romantic artist Pierre-Paul Prud'hon completely captivated him. He even visited the National Gallery Drawings Collection to view a few in person.

While this experience affected Slater profoundly, his work expresses more than a mere fascination with the idealized nude. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of his work is that while he is fundamentally faithful to the image of the model before him, his aim is to reveal the structure beneath the surface. For him, concentrating on the human figure seemed another way to consider biology. As he said, "It doesn't involve metabolism or genetics, or all the things I was used to thinking about. Instead, it's about form and structure, which I hadn't appreciated before..." that is, the reality of those aspects of the living body. The surprise and wonder of the scientist confronting the reality of the living model is something almost palpable in these works.

Slater's models are represented in a variety of standing, seated and reclining poses, frequently focusing on the torso and legs, and only sometimes on the head. "Another Thought" and "Anticipation" are



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Martin Slater's show of charcoal drawings, mostly of female nudes, includes this portrait. Called "Another Thought," it exhibits the psychological or narrative aspect of Slater's work.

two in the latter category, both portraits of women known to the artist. The warm, even sensual technique in these drawings does indeed recall Prud'hon, but Slater is interested in suggesting a narrative range of moods, in telling a story.

In a number of drawings, Slater uses a mirror as a means to provide multiple views, as a device to enhance pictorial space and as a vehicle for narrative. "Reflective Model" is a good case in point, showing the draped model seeing the drawing of herself posing nude ("Spring") reflected in the mirror behind her. The cut-off models and the use of the mirror made me think of the 1970s/'80s realist paintings of Philip Pearlstein, but the softness of Slater's charcoal technique and the feeling of intimacy with the body is quite different from the distance and objectivity of Pearlstein's approach. On the other hand, Slater's compositions are strongest when he is most focused on form rather than story.

Goulding's tonally rich photos of the female body are primarily aimed at recording the beauty of its form from a far more abstract point of view. His models are named in the titles, but it is only the center of their bodies that we see, and sometimes, as in "Jameie XV," only a part of that, seen in such a way as to appear almost completely abstract. There's something about this photo and a few others in the exhibit that is reminiscent of Baltimore photographer Connie Imboden, but without the distortion that she achieves by taking her pictures underwater. Instead, Goulding very subtly modulates the light in these pictures, going from deep, textured black to highlights that create the appearance of shimmering silver. In some, the model appears to move slowly from half-light to full in what would be a kind of "sfumato" effect in painting. In others, especially "Becky VII" and "Claire VI," the line of the silhouette curve of the side of the torso stands clearly against the background tone.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Michael Farrell simplifies the landscape to the point of abstraction. "Diagonal Fields" shows his use of arbitrary color and dark tones, underlining the dreamlike qualities the artist pursues.

There's both a certain sensuality and objectivity in these pictures. As an artist, Goulding too wants to "celebrate the beauty of the female form and spirit...to be uplifting, celebratory and aesthetically pleasing, yet rich in complexity..." More sophisticated than Slater, Goulding's aesthetic sense also springs from a kind of wonder at the variety and mystery of the body's physical reality, and this makes his work particularly compelling.

While at Glenview, take a look at the paintings of Michael Farrell, somewhat strangely paired with Goulding's photos. I think the link must have been finding abstraction in natural forms, which is also Farrell's aesthetic intent. Although they are far too repetitious to really engage the viewer in the way that the artist would wish, they are interesting in the way that they reduce forms like trees and fields into abstract shapes, as though fragments of some odd dream where things are only half seen, and in a certain darkness. (I liked "Umbrella" and "River Road" for these reasons.) Farrell seems to work from a dark ground that projects through the color. Yet he finishes the paintings with a high varnish that creates a hard, shiny surface at odds with all this dark tonality. Perhaps the idea is that the imagery is beyond reach, trapped inside the painted world.

ARTS CALENDAR

DANCES

Dance Concert — Junkyard Saints (Mardi Gras funk & Latin beats), 6-9 p.m. July 20, Outdoors on the Plaza, 3 Bethesda Metro Center, Old Georgetown Road, Wisconsin Avenue & East-West Highway, free, 301-652-4988.

Contra Dance — Friday Night Dancers: July 20, 7:30-8:15 p.m. lesson, 8:30-11:30 p.m. dancing to live music, Glen Echo Park's Spanish Ballroom, 7300 MacArthur Blvd., \$9, info@fridaynightdance.org.

Swing Dance — Gottaswing: July 21, 8-9 p.m. lesson with Tom & Debra, 9 p.m.-midnight dancing

to Stompy Jones, Glen Echo Park's Spanish Ballroom, 7300 MacArthur Blvd., \$15, www.gottaswing.com.

Contra & Square Dance — Folklore Society of Greater Washington: July 22, 7 p.m. newcomers' welcome lesson, 7:30-10:30 p.m. called dances, Glen Echo Park's Bumper Car Pavilion, 7300

MacArthur Blvd., \$12, \$9 members, 202-518-1299, www.fsgw.org.

MUSIC

Outdoor Summer Concert Series — Hungry for Music's Diamond Cuts: Erik Balkey, Chuck Brodsky & John McCutcheon, 7

p.m. July 18; Junkyard Saints, 7 p.m. July 25, Gudelsky Outdoor Concert Gazebo at Strathmore, 5301 Tuckerman Lane, North Bethesda, free, 301-581-5100.

Strathmore Backyard Theater for Children — Kevin Reese in "A Perfect Balance," 9:30 & 11:30

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