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THE Ways OF Women

Curator of exhibit at SECCA stuck to three major themes



ON DISPLAY: Kim Dingle's babies with mashed duck.

By Tom Patterson SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

n organizing the large group exhibit that recently opened at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, chief curator Jeff Fleming set out to show something of the effect that feminism has had on American art, and particularly painting.

The exhibition is titled "Women's Work: Examining the Feminine in Contemporary Painting," but that says only a little about the interrelated themes that Fleming wanted to highlight in this selection of work. He elaborates on these themes in an essay he wrote for the accompanying catalog, and he discussed them further in an interview the day before the show's opening July 18.

In the essay, Fleming recalls the emergence of feminist politics in the 1960s and the attendant effects on the art world. It was a time, he says, when "women artists began to face off against modernist art movements established, perpetuated and dominated by men."

In the interview, he said that the ac-

knowledged masters of post-war American modernism, such as Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock, "tried to eliminate any traces of autobiography from their work." This attempt, he said, exemplified "a tendency to disregard the artist as a person," which was characteristic of the male-centered modernist aesthetic.

"There's been a big change from that point of view," Fleming said.

He credited feminism and its emphasis on personal experience for the increase of autobiographical concerns and subjective viewpoints in contemporary art. He said that the effects of this shift can be seen in "Women's Work" and were also apparent in other relatively recent shows at SECCA, particularly two that he organized in 1993 and 1995.

The first of these was "Personal Narratives: Women Photographers of Color," an all-women show. The second was "Thread Bare: Revealing Content in Contemporary Fiber," which was dominated

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by women artists, as is the current show.

"It's not really a formalized series of exhibits," Fleming said, "but all three are group shows that reflect feminine concerns."

Fleming's interest in organizing shows related to such concerns, he said, was sparked by several artists with whom he worked on earlier exhibits at SECCA, particularly Adrian Piper and Joyce Scott. "I was impressed with the way they used their own experience very specifically in their work," Fleming said. He also said that his attraction to that subjective current in contemporary art significantly influenced this informal series of shows.

Enlike most contemporary exhibits with the word "women" in their titles, this is not an all-women show. Two of the artists, Lari Pittman and Jim Isermann, are men. Fleming said he included their work because both artists deal directly with some of the central thematic issues he wanted to highlight in the exhibit, and because their representation here illustrates the overall effect that "feminist methodology" has had.

tradiction in putting work by men in a show about "the feminine" titled "Women's Work," he said he also hadn't been uncomfortable as a man in organizing such a show and providing its curatorial context.

"I certainly didn't feel odd about it or feel that it was a hindrance to me," he said, "because the feminist enterprise has really enhanced postmodern thought and has been very important to contemporary artists and curators and critics without regard to their gender. My point of view happens to be a male point of view, but that just indicates that there's more than one approach."

In the catalog essay, Fleming says that "Feminism or the feminine is defined here as 'of women' or 'about women' and also as a way of thinking that allows for participation and acceptance of difference."

Fleming said that when he began putting this show together almost two years ago, he made a tentative list of artists whose work might be appropriate. That list quickly grew to 20 to 30 artists, but he said he eventually narrowed it down to 10 artists whose works he felt were the clearest examples of what he was looking for.

His essay provides insight into his selection criteria by delineating "three elements of contemporary painting that reflect the influence of feminist thought and methodology to subvert the established male perspective." He then explains how each artist employs one or more of these elements in her or his work.

Fleming defines the first element as "humor and the carnivalesque," and he sees it reflected in one way or another in about half of the works in the show, including those of Kim Dingle, Nicole Eisenman, Catherine Howe, Lisa Yuskavage and Lari Pittman. For these artists, he wrote, humor and the carnivalesque are "strategies for tearing down authority and abandoning established modes of conduct" — means of creating "a realm of freedom," in which "the rowdy female can run amok. . . .'

Fleming defines the second element as "pleasure, both visual and sexual." Evidence of this

element can be found in the work of several artists already listed, as well as the exhibit's works by Phyllis Bramson and Sabina Ott.

The third element that Fleming identifies in his essay is the acknowledgment of feminine stereotypes, which he sees as fundamental to the works by Polly Apfelbaum, Jim Isermann and Linda Besemer, in addition to some of the other artists already named.

Fleming cited Lisa Yuskavage's oil painting titled Big Blonde Squatting as a work that is particularly important to the show's curatorial premise, because it exemplifies all three of the essential elements. In this large, soft-focus image, a voluptuous nude woman puffs a cigarette as she squats barefoot, in profile, against a creamy yellow background and stares back at the viewer through one eye that peers from beneath a lock of her thick, golden-blonde hair. The image is a caricature and therefore inherently humorous, and it's based on the popular female stereotype of the blonde sex goddess, which for many people in our culture embodies the ideals of visual and sexual pleasure.

In his essay, Fleming describes all of these artists as "participants in the second generation of feminist inquiry." They range in age from 24 to 52. Collectively, he says, their work "acknowledges that the feminist movement has moved beyond its gender-based origins to become a way of living."

Women's Work: Examining the Feminine in Contemporary Painting will remain on display through Sept. 30 at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, 750 Marguerite Drive. For more information, call 725-1904.