NHS artists exhibit an intelligent array

NORTHAMPTON

Judson Brown

Report Card

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JUST because exercising the right side of the brain — the visual, intuitive, creative side — is encouraged in the advanced art class at Northampton High School, that doesn't mean the analytical and verbal left side gets off the hook, warns the teacher.

The most agonizing part of this famously demanding course for many of her students, says Lisa H. Leary, a painter herself, is composing the brief but succinct artist's credo that she requires them to write — and rewrite. The final copies are tacked up with their works at the final exhibit now hanging.

Artistic creation "is not just subjective!" she tells them. The hands may guide the brain and "expressing yourself" is a fine and necessary thing, she says, but it is also essential, in the end, to be able to explain your work, she says.

Works created by each of the students in the class, as part of their semester-long "concentration" on a single theme, comprise the heart of the exhibit, "Art 96: NHS." The show, running at the Center for the Arts through Friday, also includes a broad sampling of hundreds of drawings, paintings, jewelry, book objects, pottery, sculpture and mixed media creations produced this year by students in a range of art classes at the school.

The collections of the advanced students' work in the center's galleries, combined with their statements of purpose, offers a rare opportunity to appreciate not just the talent of these students, but the depth of their thinking and the richness of their feeling.

Some of them stress subjective and inward experience over objective reality and outward observation.

"I want my art work to speak intimately to the viewer," wrote Kiersten Sieser, whose figure studies combine realism, strong color, and cubist invention — as when a breast becomes an arm, which becomes a leg.

"I believe that reaching people on the intrinsic plane is the most powerful," she continues.

For Emily Breines, who works in clay, the subjective dimension is less apparent, although far from absent, in works that have a serene, anonymous and timeless air. While pottery has been her creative mainstay, for her concentration Breines branched out into sculpture. She is represented most strikingly in the exhibit by several nude female torsos — fairly broad-shouldered, wide-hipped forms, with a slight torsion that gives them a dynamic quality.

The figures are "influenced by dance," she writes, and part of her motivation in making them has been to fill a gap — an "extreme lack of

KEVIN GUTTING

Hannah Corbett stands with portraits she created of family members. "Blue" is a word Corbett uses to describe the mood of her paintings, hanging in a show at the Northampton Center for the Arts.

positive body images of women ... the beauty in different shapes and sizes of the female body."

Jeff Zimbalist has combined a close study of the faces of his classmates, as captured in photographs they loaned him, with what he knows about them to create a series of portraits, in various media. They reach for a psychological truth, as much as for documentary accuracy.

The three-dimensional plaster mask daubed with bright streaks of paint, and with wide open mouth, is not meant to be a likeness of Emily Breines, but a statement about her vibrant and engaging presence, he says.

His painted "Hannah Corbett" has a wholly different tone and cast – cooler, more remote, more mysterious. The long neck and all but featureless face turned away from the room and up and inward has colored a pale, almost ghostly blue.

"Blue" is a word Corbett uses to describe the mood of her own paintings, somewhat inspired by Milton Avery and his unique and wistful blend of realism and abstraction, hung in the opposite gallery.

Her figures, set against starkly simple beach and ocean backdrops, are — like Zimbalist's depiction of her — elongated, elegant, faceless, forlorn.

She deals with themes of loss in her work. Her parents' divorce is a major factor, she says. One abstract painting is a line of footprints alongside a stylized surf — her father's footprints, she explains.

Zimbalist has drawn a realistic portrait of classmate Jason Sargenski, using Sargenski's preferred medium — colored pencils. The crewcut subject, viewed from an angle and from above, clutches a bunch of them in his fist.

Not realism, but a wild surrealism delivered with an illustrator's precise detailing, is Sargenski's own mode. His pencil drawings are mesmerizing experiments in odd perspectives, distorted space and grotesque figures — like a collection of humanoid screaming falling apples, or a human skull in starry space tentatively joined to — or being ripped from — facial features that seem to melt and stream away under the pressure of an impossible velocity.

"My series is about the mystery of outer space," he writes. "My interpretation of space does not only pertain to that of the universe, but also to that of the mind."

"I try to transport viewers to a dreamlike state."

Judson Brown reports on education for the Gazette.