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Bearable likeness of being

A St. Paul show reframes portraiture with symbols of experience, sexuality and the subconscious.

By Mary Abbe
Star Tribune Staff Writer

You want a portrait the grandkids might recognize someday, hire a photographer. You want something for a psychoanalyst to chew on, have yourself portrayed by one of the artists whose work is featured in "A Likeness: Re-Examinations of the Contemporary Portrait."

On view through July 6 at Orbit Gallery, a downtown St. Paul space run by the College of Visual Art, this varied and provocative show includes everything but straightforward likenesses. Across the river at Walker Art Center, portraits painted by the late Alice Neel demonstrate that depictions can be devastatingly accurate without being flattering.

Most of the eight artists in the St. Paul show don't even try to represent, let alone flatter, their subjects in conventional ways. Instead, they lace their striking paintings, photos and sculpture with suggestive experiences, symbols and emblems of infancy, childhood, sexuality and the subconscious.

While all the art is figurative, it's not all portraiture in the sense of representing a specific person. Christine Wilcox, a Macalester College professor, paints mutant-froglike creatures swimming through sunlit water. (Several of their little heads are reminiscent of political maverick Ross Perot.) Wilcox's infantile men seem trapped in the wrong bodies and suspended in the wrong milieu, their anxious expressions and hapless gestures giving evidence of a cosmic existential screwup. Theirs are universal rather than individual portraits.

figures painted by former Minnesota artist T.L. Solien, who teaches at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Solien has often depicted clowns, dolls or beasts of burden (oxen, horses) as surrogate self-portraits, but these new figures seem to transcend biography.

There's a pathetic eager-to-please expression on the clownish face of the dog-like creature in "Skate," and a foolish inanity in the balloon-headed "Old Bishop." Solien's mutants are disconcerting and unforgettable like the little blonde girl in his "Blue Veil" drawing, her face obscured by a blue patch and graffiti. His grotesquely bruised and battered figures suggest that character is indelibly marked by childhood insecurities, disappointments and traumas.

The sexualized imagery of Mark Sawrie, a professor of film, photography and other media at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind., implies that identity is defined by the body and its sexual attributes. Derived from photos he has inkjet-printed onto canvas, Sawrie's shadowy images depict what he calls a uterus (which looks surprisingly like the skull of a moose or other animal) and a set of bikini shapes (breasts and briefs with semi-erect penises).

For the record, Sawrie claims to have somehow used his own semen in creating the images, an assertion that is irrelevant to

Minneapolis photographer Karl Raschke offers five large color images and six snapshot-sized photos in black-and-white that portray relationships ("Patrick + Me/Seattle"), rituals ("Wedding Portrait") and activities ("Bowlers"). With their odd cropping, blurs and indifferent lighting, these color photos have an offhand casualness that conveys the aimlessness of contemporary life. By contrast, the smaller pictures (one of a double bed, another of a man in coffin) seem weighted with big

questions about commitment and eternity. While the juxtapositions are awkward and by no means clear-cut, the series is quietly provocative.

New York painter Rafael Salas is the most traditional and symbolic portraitist here. His two paintings are from a "Sons of Adam" series. In each, he depicts a solitary man seated at a table bearing symbolic objects: fish, a glass, coins. Seasonal attributes fill the background — sun, moon, flowery garden, snowy night.

A LIKENESS: CONTEMPORARY PORTRAITS

What: 30 symbolic and stylized portraits by eight artists from the Twin Cities, New York, Wisconsin, Indiana and Georgia.

When: Thru July 6.

Where: Orbit Gallery, 5 W. 7th Place, St. Paul.

Tickets: Free. 651-293-0884.

Tapping into a long multicultural tradition, Salas poignantly links his men with animal alter-egos or spirit guides by portraying one with a shadowy rabbit mask, the other with a cow's head. Vigorously executed, Salas' paintings wear their quasi-religious solemnity gracefully.

The three remaining artists offer different psychological takes on the human condition. Tamara Brantmeier of St. Paul paints women wearing simplified nunlike costumes and kindly or sympathetic expressions. Georgia-based Jeffrey Whittle paints heads over road maps, cleverly altering his colors with a kind of paint-by-number jerkiness dictated by the underlying pattern of roads and rivers. And sculptor Pattie Chalmers creates 4-foot-tall dolls in poses of misunderstanding and belated insight.