

REVIEW: Art inspired by Martha Wilson's Sourcebook

August 22, 2013

By Mary Louise Schumacher of the Journal Sentinel



The Portrait Society Gallery's show "The Personal is Political" featured both the work of Martha Wilson, a nationally known feminist artist and performance artist and local artists whose work has been inspired by her ideas.

Each local artist riffed on ideas they found in Wilson's Sourcebook, a compilation of essays and ideas from other writers and thinkers. One of the things I came away with from this show thinking was that I wish I had my own sourcebook, a collection of writings that have formed who I am. I love the idea of a manual for one's intellectual life.

The show included works by Rafael Francisco Salas, Amy O'Neill, Laci Coppins, Paul Druecke, Niki Johnson and Joseph Mougel.

In any case, if you'd like a peek at the show, which has just closed, here are a few images to peruse. The show was held in conjunction with a Martha Wilson retrospective at Inova, which is ongoing through August 11.



Rafael Francisco Salas' "The Woman Who Drank the Ocean," shown at the gallery in 2009.

His first show was Peter Dean, a New York artist who applied lurid color in generous slathers, like butter. Dean was political, difficult and usually "on the shady side," critic Lucy Lippard once wrote.

Jensen sold one of the Deans before the show even opened for a cool \$8,000, a boatload of money then. Jensen carted himself around in a bottom-of-the-line Ford Escort "without a piece of chrome on it" at that time, and briefly entertained visions of financial success. For the first few years, though, he barely made enough to cover rent.

Many galleries have a focus or strength. Jensen's varies, depending on who you ask. Bowman, now a successful art dealer in Chicago, points to photography and visionary art. Debra Brehmer, owner of the Portrait Society Gallery and a long-time observer of the scene, is more taken by the old-school classicism in the painting shows.

It's a gallery for connoisseurs, people who are most interested in the formal qualities of art, to be sure, but it's a place driven by ideas, too.

His proclivity for artistic eccentrics or so-called outsiders has always been a hallmark and consistent with his fondness for circus folk, who he refers to as artists, whose independence he calls heroic.

But what's consistent is a level of quality and seriousness. Jensen shows more good work in his back hallway, a cubby-like space on the way to the restroom, than most galleries in town show on their main walls.

"I remember being totally blown away by an Ed Paschke show at Dean's gallery when I was a student at MIAD," says Mike Brenner, who some years later opened his own space, Hotcakes Gallery. Brenner inquired about a small piece beside the bathroom, a \$6,000 work. He remembers thinking that he could make it as a gallerist one day if he could sell just one "bathroom painting" a month.

I am reminded of discovering a small trio of paintings by Rafael Francisco Salas in that same little hallway. His "The Woman Who Drank the Ocean" (left) was a haunting image of a woman who seemed to have swallowed a sea of emotion, turning her skin bluish, sickly and tissue-paper thin.

It'd be easy to think Milwaukee's gallery scene is abundant, judging from a typical Gallery Night brochure. But it's far from it. Take away the pop-ups and hair salons, the spaces that don't sell art in a sustainable way, and you can pretty much count who's left on your fingers.

Among those, Jensen is the most august.

Photographer Sonja Thomsen was told by colleagues in San Francisco that Jensen's was the only gallery worth considering, when she moved here in 2004. Printmaker Tyanna Buie was told much the same by grad-school mentors at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

More than any gallery in the city, it's also an intimate reflection of its owner, which is odd because Jensen can come off as quite aloof. Still, in the right moment, with the right question, he opens right up and speaks as articulately and deeply as anyone about art.

"He doesn't really care what the world thinks is beautiful," says Buie, who has shown work in the gallery. "He knows what he thinks is beautiful. It is all over the place, but in a good way."