

Karin Broker: *damn girls*, Contemplating Tall Flowers

By Jim J. Tommaney, May 12, 2014

From a distance, the huge flowers drawn by Karin Broker seem merely decorative, though also powerful in their stark simplicity; it is only on a closer approach that the background is seen to be, not neutral, but filled with the names of women, painstakingly handwritten. Some are horizontal, some vertical, some upside down, hundreds of them, and program notes suggest that each has a story known to the artist.



Image courtesy of the artist and McClain Gallery;
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"amaryllis goodbyes"

The result is a linkage between the insignificance of a single signature and the massive impact when they are grouped together in a textural "solidarity". And above the mute testimony towers a symbol of beauty, sometimes a single amaryllis, or a cluster of flowers, themselves a symbol of dominance, but one that is also transitory, destined to die and decay.

I think of these drawings as 'the tall flowers' - there are nine of them, with the largest 8' x 5'. Seven of them come with a leather bound book that lists the names and brief biographical data of women who have intrigued the artist, some historical figures and some virtually unknown.

The tall flowers seem close to monochromatic, though there are gradations moving toward color, but there are also five smaller monoprint collages, about 28 by 39 inches, where color is introduced, though in muted earth-tones. I liked best one titled "my white skin: show girl", where the artist allowed a tiny allotment of red onto her palette.

Broker also is showing three steel pieces of furniture, each one heavily etched with engravings. Two are benches, each 48 x 15 x 19 inches, and they tell, not just a story, but rather a panoply of stories, incidents, confrontations, love affairs, including illustrations of some of the men involved. One is titled "Taking Self" and one I liked even better "I/Eye Gone". This has the inscription: 'What does he need? What does he want?', echoing Sigmund Freud's query about women. Central here is an outline of a head, the face blank, permitting a woman to imagine herself in the picture. There are dotted lines suggesting a cut-out paper doll, and arrows about the head suggesting that different hairstyles might be tried on. Some of the anecdotes suggest a rich and active sex life, and the overall result is a work of furniture art, steel but comfortable, which is pulsing with vitality.

The benches were created in 1995; since they are museum-quality, and modestly priced for their wit, talent and detail, I'm surprised they haven't been snatched up. And, yes, one can sit on them while contemplating the tall flowers.

The third piece has seven separate elements: a steel dining room table 5' by 3', and six steel chairs that match, though the engravings on each is different. This is a new work, finished this year, and is titled "too hot, too cold". It has a formal quality, a gravitas, and a simple elegance that is beautiful. To sit at it for dinner would be like being immersed in history, reminding us that we are links in the chain of creation and re-creation. There is as well a leather bound book on the table, and pens, and visitors are encouraged to add comments to the final pages.

A large (8' x 5'), mixed media steel piece, with an iron chain, is titled "5'6". The effect is somber, and a bit heavy-handed for an artist with such a gift for wit.

This exhibition is elaborate, and complex. The result is the sense of a strong decisive personality flooding the attractive gallery, even a spiritual aura, of an artist who knows her own mind, and reflects it with skill and decisiveness.

Karin Broker: damn girls continues through May 31, McClain Gallery, 2242 Richmond Avenue, Tuesday through Friday, 10 to 5:30, Saturdays 11 to 5, information at 713-520-9988 or www.mcclaingallery.com.