

# ARTSHIFT San Jose

January 2, 2009

## Figuration, from the Literal to the Abstract

By Erin Goodwin-Guerrero

Figurative Artists: Chiarito, Souza, Muonio, Oblon, Loudon, Wilson and Wilson show at North First ARTspace.

By Erin Goodwin-Guerrero

Joining a growing tradition in the South Bay, in the last year, the corporate lobby and hallways of Orchard Commercial have become a fashionable gallery of contemporary art. Without many private galleries or a commercial art scene in the South Bay, the "North First ARTspace" contribution to art-viewing is welcome in Silicon Valley.

Curator Carla Turturici, began with a program of art exhibitions showing work done by the faculty and students of San Jose State University's School of Art and Design. Now, in *Off State Street*, she enlarges her view to include artists from around the Bay Area, presenting figurative show that is large in scale and nicely fills the open spaces of the expansive Orchard Commercial building. Turturici plays with the concept of figuration in painting and allows this show to manifest figures and portraits in many forms and media.

Robert Chiarito has always used the figures in his paintings as a vehicle to mock the human condition and our overblown sense of self-importance. Intrigued by Art Brut and the Cobra school, he calls his most recent series in this direction "the serious pursuit of play". A lot of the marks and indicators that eventually become figures in his current paintings are executed with his eyes closed. Chiarito allows textures, marks and lines to accumulate as part of the working process. Eventually a figure and context that lie close to the subconscious emerge, immune to over-intellectualization. He enjoys "the surprise and even preposterousness" of the results. After discovery of his nascent actors and an overall scenario, he directs the outcome from a more conscious level.

Chiarito's colors and hilarious characters are bold and childlike. With male musculature and full breasts they are often androgynous. Sometimes they are half man, half machine, perhaps a scary creature from a scary dream. Certainly their brightness, scale and playful antics enliven the entry of Orchard Commercial.

Robert Oblon's *Puzzle Piece* series recall Elizabeth Murray blended with some techniques from the adventurous epochs of Frank Stella. In this series Oblon merges his work as a sculptor and a painter. Like Robert Chiarito, he draws on bold color and the recall of a childlike routine — doodling — for creating his amoeba-like shapes in flat plywood cutouts. Selected often for their voluptuous references to the female form, then covered with canvas and painted, a group of cutouts is assembled to compose an abstract figure jutting forward into space from the wall. There is interplay of each flat shape with that of its neighbor, and the negative space and shadows that are created. The metallic surfaces and luminous colors allow for shifting impressions and give life to these 3-D creations.

The portraits presented by Andy Muonio are often remarkable for their size and loose painterliness. Muonio starts from the unlikely beginnings of the digital image. It is a resource for collecting and examining the details of form that feed into a likeness to the subject. But it is also a consciously wry play with the dominant media of our age. The human form observed, translated into that dreadfully impersonal byte of information, and then reformed into something grand, lively and individual in the tradition of painting, replete with the celebration of the medium itself: big canvasses with notable paint and brush strokes. There is a handsome balance struck between the identity in the individual portrait and a hearty embrace of painting.

Lesley Loudon offers a series of photographic portraits of Evelyn. The *Evelyn, Nothing Fancy* portraits tell us something about the woman who worked for fifty years as a secretary in an accounting firm. She designed and sewed her own camouflage pattern and leopard skin suits and dresses, so that she could be dressed professionally but uniquely. She bakes zucchini nut bread, decorates her personal environment, and adorns herself with her own creations. In spite of Loudon's assertion that she honors Evelyn for her expressions of individuality, these portraits have something in common with the work of Diane Arbus. The viewer sees an overweight woman in somewhat clueless fashion statements and feels uncomfortable. She is our mother, a neighbor, the secretary where we do occasional business, locked into a numbing routine, and we know she struggles to surpass

limits and break out of her ordinary life.

Working in the San Francisco dump as an artist in residence has had a great influence on the art of Noah Wilson. The constant appearance, amidst other trash, of discarded snapshot portraits provoked his curiosity about the identity of the individuals in each one, the circumstances that would allow someone to decide to preserve a moment of life, and later discard it. Wilson began to collect, preserve, re-photograph and represent these snapshots, in a fashion that evoked their history of disregard and abuse. He states, "By re-photographing these found photographs as objects, they become what they are—a vessel—but they also become both a window and a mirror. We stare at photographs and they stare back, asking us to wonder, asking us to remember."

Tammy Jo Wilson remembers her mother's service as a nurse in a work where endless, faceless nurses are lined up row after row, in exactly the same uniform, and they all appear exactly the same. Is it because we forget to honor and remember those who serve us? Does she say that in order to serve in a noble way, they have given up their personal lives and identities? Is there something about a professional in a uniform that we have trouble recognizing as an individual? Was Wilson's own mother lost to her in the legions of working nurses?

Mary Souza's big figurative paintings are not specific in development of the figure itself. In the tradition of the Bay Area Figurative painters, these works are really about paint, the surface of the canvas, the textures, color, lines, and shapes that comprise the figure in that rectangular field. And it is, of course about process, as well. Whether or not an individual model is used to provoke a figure to emerge, the viewer will not know an individual face or even the age or gender. Souza's mysterious figures may reveal themselves with as little as the hint of single red arm resting on a knee perhaps, as in the upper left corner of *Presence*. In other cases they seem to be the sketchy, diagrammatic under-drawing of a figure that is not yet fully built. They are like the muse of painting that only appears, only when she is ready, when the chemistry is right, to grace the surface of the painting.

Off State Street runs through January 30, 2009 and an artists' reception will be held January 9, 2009, 5-7:00 pm.

Posted by erin on Friday, January 2nd, 2009 at 8:30 pm.