
Genius, reality, and familiar revolutions

By Cate McQuaid

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Todd Pavlisko praises and pities genius in his dark party of an exhibition at Samson. The show, “All of Nothing,” bops from one snazzy mixed-media work to the next, grabbing at you with candy colors, giant forms, and faces familiar from a generation ago: Richard Pryor, Carl Sagan, Bobby Fischer. But while the pulse-quickenning bling may give you a buzz, this show has an undertow, and the more time you spend, the more it tugs you into deeper waters.

Twice, Pavlisko replicates the close-up photo of Pryor from the cover of his provocatively titled 1974 album, “That Nigger’s Crazy.” Pryor points at his face; maybe he’s rotating one index finger by his temple to suggest he’s loony. In one untitled work, Pavlisko reproduces the image with plastic price-tag fasteners attached to a giant canvas. The colorful, bristly piece dominates the exhibit, making Pryor the trickster god who’s overseeing the proceedings.

The picture reappears in “The Operation for the Stone,” a diptych, with its two canvases hanging on opposite walls like stereo speakers. Each is black written over with calligraphic gold lines, an echo of the format of “Cutting the Stone,” a Hieronymus Bosch painting. A detail from that painting shows a figure in a funnel hat taking a scalpel to a man’s skull. It’s at the center of one canvas; the Pryor portrait is at the center of the other.

Bosch’s painting has text that translates in part as “Master, cut out the stone. . .,” a reference to madness. The title of Pryor’s album appears over the Bosch image; the Bosch quote is painted above the comedian’s face. Associations leap across the gallery and across centuries: Artists provoke their audiences, and expose themselves, with the transgressive content of their art.

In the show’s title piece, a white marble statue of Sagan, the late astronomer, stands amid a riot of huge, colorful, translucent bongos, each topped with a foam hand. The Sagan sculpture wears one reading “Grey Matter.” The statue looks constrained and lost amid the hoopla from the head shop, but the bongos are wilting. The artist questions whether genius isolates. Certainly, it’s a burden as much as it is a gift.

Hypnotic ideas of reality

“I’m curious about the way in which paintings have the habit of becoming trophies,” Michael Wetzel writes in his artist’s statement for “Sunny Today,” his exhibit at LaMontagne Gallery. His still-life paintings, with titles such as “Yacht Club” and “Hunting Club,” depict a culture of privilege. Like the Dutch still lifes of the 16th and 17th centuries, they take vanitas as their theme: Everything passes. But Wetzel’s paintings forego volume. Almost everything — stacked pyramids of champagne glasses, platters of lobster and finger sandwiches — appears to coalesce out of a rush of pattern and paint, and may just as readily dissolve.

“Travel Club” sets the glasses stacked poolside, casting blotted reflections in the green-blue water. Champagne overflows and drips deliciously. The background has abutting motifs: a floral pattern; the arc of a green plate; vertical ribbons of blue, topped with a saucy red-white squiggle. In the cleverly constructed “Gin,” we’re looking down at finger sandwiches, assorted in striped triangles on a striped plate edged with flowers. Paler triangles rotate over the placemat below, set on a red tile surface. Wetzel cleverly shifts perspectives; as your eye moves up the canvas, you’re looking out, not down.

Nothing in these pictures is solid. Their bricks are patterns; their mortar is paint. The patterns are

hypnotic, but they also suggest psychological patterning that holds ideas of reality in place to maintain sanity — they don't necessarily represent reality. Wetzel tops off his still lifes with a handful of wonderfully creepy portraits, such as "White Dress," in which he builds flesh out of repeated filigrees, a delicate scaffolding of self, fragile as bone china.

Narrating her Persia

Nahid Khaki returned to her native Iran in 2008, after 30 years away. Her heartfelt photographic collages, on view at Khaki Gallery in Wellesley, shuffle images of her family (most of which she took, but including some old family photos) with her shots of rural and urban life in Iran. She assembles each collage against a background of patterns from Persian architecture and textiles. The backgrounds reinforce the woven narratives Khaki creates in the collages.

All the works are untitled. One juxtaposes a portrait of a mournful woman with an image of a commemorative plate depicting a military man, then a photo of Khaki's elderly father, and a scene from an art gallery, with women in hijabs mulling beneath a chandelier. The artist casts a gimlet eye on the power of men and the treatment of women in Iran.

One piece is structured around circles: a bowl, a teapot, a fountain, a plate. Then, there are images of Khaki's father in his middle years, and now; of musicians playing traditional instruments; of a wall in her family home, new when she left, now with paint peeling. She poignantly conveys the revolution of time, in one family, and in a nation.

Cate McQuaid can be reached at catemcquaid@gmail.com.

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