

Gallery Lounge artists go out on a limb

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Capital Times Staff

Our distant ancestors left little behind for us in the way of a legacy outside our genes. Yet, we know the length of their fingers and the width of their palms. We can measure ourselves against the ghosts because so many took up a handful of pigment and pressed it into the pores of stone.

Civilization has not lessened artists' fascination with hands. Michaelangelo depicted the first man fingertip to fingertip with his creator. Disembodied hands appear as symbols in the work of Miro, Clemente and others.

Through Jan. 31, the Gallery Lounge plays host to "Dan Burns and Milt Friedly: Mixed Media," an exhibit that combines a broad range of materials and style, held together by the imagery of hands, as well as other human parts.

Burns' "Spirit" acrylics have an open hand as their focal point. In "Spirit of Death" the hand descends from the top of the canvas. It does not grasp, but hangs limply, impaled on what could be a thorn tree. Because Burns used raw canvas, the earth-toned acrylic stains bleed outward and downward, blurring outlines, creating a misty effect.

"Spirit of Life" reverses the arrangement but retains the vertical

balance and muted colors. The hand rises from the bottom of the canvas, sprouting a tree-like shape. The static, frozen sense inhabiting "Spirit of Death" is gone. The viewer almost feels that tomorrow that hand and tree may have grown beyond the canvas, spreading up the wall.

"Resurrected Spirit" is the only fully painted canvas of the three. With less

ART REVIEW

contrast between background and figures than the other two, this painting seems flatter and less ethereal. The hand reaches up, tossing a handful of feathers or leaves into the air. Or perhaps the hand is extended to catch them.

"Apparition" is a bridge between the two styles that Burns uses in the works displayed. Executed with loose brushwork in vivid colors, it seems at first glance to be a complete departure from the "Spirit" series. But then the viewer sees the ghostly arms reaching out of the central mass, twining and overlapping.

The thick impasto used in "Apparition" ties it to other Burns' paintings: "Tragedy of the American Male," "Hero," "Cry in the Dessert" and "Benediction."

All four have a frontal human figure as focal point as well. "Tragedy" mixes organic and geometric shapes; the dark

curves of the human body are imprisoned and compressed within hard-edged shards of brighter colors. The figure is almost faceless: only a mouth open in a scream and the hint of a blindfold are discernable. "Benediction" disturbs us with an armless torso, how can we feel blessed if no hands bestow the blessing?

Milton Friedly's "Arms Arrangement, A, B, C" does nothing to relieve the viewer's unease.

Here, in realistically modeled ceramic, is the conventional mechanism of blessing, devoid of grace. Arms and hands are reduced to isolated components, spatial relationships explored as a formal exercise.

From across the lounge "Radial Ears" brings to mind an Indian mandala made out of the interlacing knots of Celtic metalwork. A closer view proves its relationship to "Arms Arrangement." A dark green-blue glaze gives the individual ears a uniformity that eases the viewer

into contemplation of basic structure.

Friedly's pieces, "Anxiety," "Earth peace" and "Out West" share a common shape: a more or less flat ceramic disc that ripples and buckles, collapses and bulges like a frozen ocean or a turtle shell or maybe fan coral. His variations include a swirl of Pollock-like dribbles and the sly humor of gold foil stars.

His precise lines on "Jacob" and "his Grace" seem dauntingly perfect to those of us with less skilled hands. While carefully distilled and technically exact, the images are still abstract enough to promote contemplation in the viewer.

Burns and Friedly share little in the way of style, media, use of space, color or rhythm, yet they live in the same universe. It is strewn with human fragments, arms and hands that have nothing to hold on to. Jacob looks up the ladder into heaven, but there are no angels to see.

Penn State Harrisburg's 1992 Heritage Series

Jan. 27--Keith Brintzenhoff, "Pennsylvania Deitsch Music and Stories,"
Gallery Lounge, 12:05 p.m.-1 p.m.

March 28--Irish Centre Dancers, Student Center, Capital Union
Building, 8 p.m.

Apr. 8--Susan Leviton and Joseph Mayanja, "Holocaust Perspectives,"
Gallery Lounge, noon-1:30 p.m.

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