

Photographer has painter's eye for detail

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During March and the beginning of April, the work of Mary Kay Neff and Nancy Lenker Topolski in the Gallery Lounge testifies to the importance of photography in contemporary art. Neff is a photographer who draws inspiration from a painterly muse; Topolski, a painter whose perceptions are saturated by American culture's photographic images.

At first glance, the viewer could mistake Mary Kay Neff's alternative process photographs for watercolors and other forms of painting. The colors are serene; the figures are ghostly.

The impressionistic print "My Mother's Garden" takes us back a century or more, to a time when Modern Art and photography were both young. The gum dichromate process the artist uses was invented in the mid-1800s, and incorporates watercolor pigment in the coating of the print page. The green, lavender and blue dots that harmonize into flowers are a muted echo of Seurat's pointillism.

"Untitled II" could have been titled "Silence." The empty chair stationed at the blank window yearns for the one who sat there just a moment ago. The chaste lines of chair, floor, wall and window touch each other with discipline, creating a hushed and secret place.

The striking "Moon Flower" utilizes another form of early photographic experimentation: cyanotype. The chemical mix involved is sensitive to ultraviolet light and always dries to the characteristic blue shade (which is a little like saying that some oil, ground rock, and plaster turned into a ceiling of the Sistine Chapel).

The white shivers into the blue the way clouds blur the sky and seafoam blends into the waves. The bell of the flower pierces your heart and the moon knows everything you've done.

Faint scraps of diary entries or excerpts from a letter flow through the blue and white universe. "I've been going to the back porch to see the moon come over the mountain. Last night...out there...tonight..." but the moon always has been comfortable with mystery.

The other half of the exhibit picks up where "Moon Flower" leaves off, combining visual images with words in a less romantic fashion.

Nancy Lenker Topolski acknowledges the influence of Jenny Holtzer and others of the "text as image" school on her work. The meaning of the phrase for each piece is carefully selected, but when she starts painting, the linear components of the

letters become more powerful for her.

"The words are like a still life for me," the artist commented, during a March 25 lecture in the Gallery Lounge. "I use them the way other artists use fruit or flowers."

ART REVIEW

Although her main focus is formal problems of painting, she is aware of the feminist themes that run through her work as well. She is not a political activist, preferring to hint at serious issues with tongue firmly in cheek.

The large canvas "Can't Stand the Heat" features a young woman hovering in a frying pan above the words: "I think we have an emergency here," while the pan lid descends ominously.

The figures resemble prints in black and shades of gray. With a relatively

dark/green/gray background, contrast is minimal and the work appears faded and worn, despite its age (1990).

A wry surrealism unites a collection of small canvases that make up the piece entitled "A Fear of Strength."

Commercially slick portraits of "another woman without a head," a Doberman, a cat and a fisherman vie with straving children, a doll and a bewitching Elizabeth Montgomery for wall space.

A trio of women dance in tight, short dresses while levitating kitchen equipment menaces a housewife in the next panel. The panels have a dark mustard background in common. Some layers of paint are either mixed with shellac or lightly coated to give a subtly sparkle.

However, the sheen, in conjunction with the low contrast colors, makes some panels almost impossible to view for the average size person.

From the other side of the gallery,

"Identify Your Target" resembles an aqua and warholpink quilt.

At a closer range, the squares depict a variety of feet. One is replaced by a lethal-looking lipstick, vivid enough to be mistaken for a glued-on prop from the other side of the room.

Topolski admitted to horror at the barrage of manipulated images from TV and magazines that influenced her growing up. Awareness of their weight enables her to moderate their power on her adult mind, but she still battles against the authority they exercise on the American mind.

Worst of all, "Not only do we covet the images that substitute for reality, we come to prefer them," she said. She said it best in one of her older paintings that is not in this show: "Experience: there is no substitute."

You can experience the work of Mary Kay Neff and Nancy Lenker Topolski in the Gallery Lounge through April 10.

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Alan Rinehart and John Collins

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"Humor in the Workplace"

by Ruth Brillinger
Director, Health Gain
Capital Health System

Wednesday, April 1, 2 p.m.
in the Gallery Lounge

Free and open to the public



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