

Los Angeles Times

Who am I? Provocative answers in 'Me, Myself, I' at China Art Objects



LaToya Ruby Frazier, "Grandma Ruby Smoking Pall Malls (detail)," 2002, gelatin silver print. (China Art Objects)

By Christopher Knight, Art Critic

LaToya Ruby Frazier's black-and-white photograph of her grandmother shows the gray-haired matriarch in profile, lighting up a Pall Mall in a cluttered room stuffed with nearly two-dozen dolls. It takes just a moment to register that the tousled older woman is black and that almost all the dolls, many elaborately dressed and coifed, are white.

Between the implication of younger and older generations, where does the artist stand? Muffled and haunting perceptions of self and family, social and individual identity, crowd the mind's eye.

Frazier's eight portraits, still lifes and landscapes are standouts in "Me, Myself, I," a group show of seven artists at China Art Objects. (The show marks the California debut of the 2015 MacArthur fellow.) Selfhood is not an uncommon subject for artistic exploration, but several selections are provocative.

In the best works, making order out of chaos goes unrequited.

A printed text by Francis Stark ruminates on self-deprecation as a manipulative social tool. She juxtaposes the printed paragraph with all of its individual words alphabetized by first letter — lead/like/laugh/least; your/you/you/yelled, etc. — a nonsense task that results in strange poetry.

Similarly, thrift-shop browsers thumb through bins of vinyl records in a dozen photographic fliers by Moyra Davey. Bereft products of mass culture get personalized and privileged by a mix of desire and loss — which might even describe the people.

Photographs appropriated from '80s pornography are digitally enlarged by Richard Hawkins. Fudged and fragmented by the process, they've gotten to the point where the idealized young man's once-soft skin seems damaged by age — or perhaps tattooed by the artist's memory.

A forest of wintry birches painted by Sean Landers is scarred by graffiti. Words for personal physical and character traits — beautiful, intelligent, dishonest, rubes — are carved into the trees' paper-like bark. Landers' painting overlays urban and rural, public and private, discomfiting both the forest and its trees.

A few weak notes are struck. Emily Mae Smith's small geometric paintings suggest open mouths that reveal interior fantasies, but the Pop Surrealism of those inner dreams are lackluster. And Heinz Peter Knes' seemingly random display of six photographs — the artist's feet, the rear end of a donkey sculpture, an unfocused wall and other mundane sites — are cryptic to the point of bland illegibility.

China Art Objects, 6086 Comey Ave., Culver City. Through Aug. 20; closed Sundays and Mondays. (323) 965-2264, www.chinaartobjects.com

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