

Entertainment

ART MATTERS: EXHIBITIONS IN SIGHT: Artist carves adolescents and 'Social Studies'

Tuesday, May 28, 2013

By Burt Wasserman

As a general rule, holding a solo exhibition is a significant event in an artist's career. For Susan Hagen, this distinction is about to be doubled. Her carved wooden sculptures and highly representational drawings will be offered simultaneously in two different venues where recent art-works are regularly presented.

One of these installations will run from June 7 to July 20 at the Center for Art in Wood at 141 N. 3rd St. in Old City. The other is set to remain on view in the Schmidt-Dean Gallery at 1719 Chestnut St. (4th floor) in center city through June 29. It is titled "Susan Hagen: This is Real/New Work about Life in Philadelphia."

The show at the Center for Art in Wood was curated by distinguished critic and art professor Robin Rice. It is labeled "Susan Hagen: Social Studies." Besides the artworks on display, a gallery talk by the artist will be offered on Saturday, June 8, at 2 p.m. In addition, an opening reception will take place a day earlier, on Friday, June 7, between 5 and 8 p.m. There is no admission fee for either of these occasions.

Hagen was born in Champaign, Ill., and grew up in Stevens Point, Wisc.. Today, she lives in Philadelphia and teaches at Bucks County Community College. Besides a BFA degree from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, she also holds an MFA from the Cranbrook Academy of Art. Her major field was sculpture at both schools.

To this day, her principal areas of concentration in the studio are small-scale selections in carved wood, which she then finishes by burning, bleaching or painting, and also drawings, mostly rendered in ink wash and Conté crayon on paper.

In the past, Hagen's oeuvre has touched on a diversity of themes — from animals threatened with extinction to soldiers enduring the vicissitudes of service in zones of deadly combat.

An especially interesting group of important pieces dealt with historically significant tableaux illuminating life experienced by prisoners and civilians at Eastern State Penitentiary. Yet another fascinating group of sculptures was dedicated to renderings of boys and girls passing through their teenage years.

Most recently, her efforts have been tuned in to close-ups on everyday life in the local region. Chris Schmidt, her gallerist in the Rittenhouse Square vicinity, has observed, "Hagen's work affords spectators a rare insight into the local ecosystem and the challenges it presents to those who are surrounded by it."

"Furthermore," he adds, "the mythology of the immediate region and the heroic struggle of people to carry on within their world makes up the core of her latest focus of attention."

In a curious kind of way, I think Hagen's art brings the plays of the Russian dramatist Anton Chekhov to mind. Like him, she presents various believable human characters. They are deeply touched by situations that stretch their capacities for responding to circumstances over which they have minimal control.

Very much to her credit, Hagen keeps her work free of cloying sentimentality and slick appeals to grossly popular taste. By exercising her own special touch over what she puts together, Hagen brings a continuity of concern to areas of expression that have a long history.

Typically, one finds precedents for her sense of compassionate humanism in the art of masters as Goya, Courbet, Daumier, van Gogh, Munch and Kollwitz.

Hagen approaches her figures of adolescents with an especially perceptive feeling for their individuality. Unlike artists who treat groups of people in society with all-encompassing generalizations, she sees them primarily as unique beings with features of stature, dress and personal identity that are separate from each other.

Surely, the fact that she is the mother of a teenaged son has provided her with perceptions of him and his associates that have imparted a poignant measure of special insight into their adolescent nature. In turn, this provides a degree of authenticity to the various carvings in this category she has brought to completion.

From our earliest childhood years, we are all endlessly fascinated by the external appearance of other people and by their inner-directed capacity for dealing with unfolding events. For me, these universal facts of life shape the foundation of expressive form on which Hagen's work is predicated.

Together, they are sensitively perceived by her sympathetic awareness of the circumstances that affect their lives. In the aggregate, they make up a powerful language of vision. In her hands, that language is thoughtful, original and deeply moving.

Visitors who are ready to share in what she has to show are bound to be profoundly touched by the depth and sincerity of her work.

Susan Hagen: Social Studies

is showing at

The Center for Art in Wood,

141 N. 3rd St.

Philadelphia, PA 19106,

June 7 – July 20.

Hours: Tuesday - Saturday;

10 a.m. – 5 p.m.,

Sunday & Monday;

Closed.

Tickets: Free.

Info: 215-923-8000 or

www.centerforartinwood.org.

Also at

Schmidt-Dean Gallery,

1719 Chestnut St.,

Philadelphia, PA 19103,

Through June 29.

Hours: Tuesday – Saturday;

10:30 – 6:00.

Info: 215-569-9433 or

www.schmidtdean.com.

URL: <http://www.montgomerynews.com/articles/2013/05/28/entertainment/doc51a4e1dc906b8775833827 prt>

