



Julie Heffernan, July 2013

Two exhibits, two world views

Artists bridge past and present
in detailed paintings and sculptures

by Rebecca Wallace

If this is a warning about the dangers of consumption, it's the most generous of caveats.

In Julie Heffernan's 2010 painting "Self-Portrait Moving Out," two women drag their worldly goods across a rickety bridge. True, some of their possessions are falling into a chasm, but in a festive way. Flags wave above; the sky is all glorious peaches and blues; the buildings below are beautifully formed and vaguely Tuscan.

Many of Heffernan's paintings have a European flair. The lushness of the landscape feels familiar, like a Baroque or Renaissance canvas. "Self-Portrait Moving Out" and its cohorts, now displayed at the Palo Alto Art Center, are works informed by the past but immersed in the present. In turn, they can provide bridges to the future by warning about growing dangers, albeit picturesquely.

This summer, the art center has paired Heffernan's figurative and landscape paintings with work by another artist who draws on the past. Across from the main exhibit, "Sky Is Falling: Paintings by Julie Heffernan," is "Community Heirloom Project" by Bay Area artist Shenny Cruces.

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Members of the Palo Alto community have contributed their own pieces of the past to these assemblage sculptures. Cruces put out a call for objects that were meaningful — but not so meaningful that people would object to having them cast in porcelain. The artist worked the items, or porcelain reproductions of them, into sculptures filled with repeating patterns: rabbit ears, doll faces, clock pendulums and a piggy bank shaped like a pineapple. There's humor and a curious grace in this rebranding of familiar objects.

"They're tightly packed," curator Lisa Ellsworth says of the assemblages during a tour, "and the more you look the more you find. She's very deliberate." Ellsworth points out a repeating motif of arcs: both in the curves of the bunny ears and in the way that delicate plates are arranged on one wall.

Ellsworth finds the pairing of Heffernan and Cruces a natural one. Besides bridging the past and present, both artists also share a love of details and layered elements, she said.

Heffernan, a New Yorker who grew up in Marin County, is presenting her exhibition as a mid-career survey, though most of the works are from the last five years. Born in 1956 in Illinois, she earned a bachelor's degree in painting and printmaking from the University of California at Santa Cruz and a master's in painting from the Yale School of Art. She has exhibited in galleries from Tokyo to San Francisco to New York.

"This is my first show in Palo Alto and I'm thrilled because when I was in high school we would steal my parents' car and come out here to hang out on Stanford campus and pretend we were college kids," Heffernan says in an email interview. "So now legitimately to be hanging out here (at least virtually!) is in a sense a way of things coming back around!"

Heffernan's cheerfulness is reflected in her paintings. Dark motifs and scenes dwell side-by-side with optimistic images: dead birds and fruit bursting with ripeness, ample flowers and loosely woven net bags that barely keep their contents from falling. Heavy topics such as conspicuous consumption, war and climate change blossom in her work, thanks in part to the National Public Radio programs she listens to while painting.

"Self-Portrait Moving Out," Heffernan says, is absolutely about consumption. "The pile in 'Moving Out' is all the extra useless stuff we haul around throughout our lives that provide, I guess, some kind of psychic ballast for us, but really just holds us down."

She mentions the large letters interspersed among the women's possessions in the painting: H-E-L-P-D-U-N-K-L-E. "'Hell' means 'light' in German, and Dunkle means dark, but hell is also that place down below, and when merged with the falling letter P is a cry for ..." Heffernan writes, trailing off. "I want some of the stuff the women are hauling to function as the words they don't have, their cries in the wilderness."

Other aspects of the painting have double meanings. While the flags flying above the possessions look celebratory, they are also of the nations that will be hit first by sea-level rise, Ellsworth says back in the gallery. The Tuscan-esque buildings down below are starting to be submerged in water.

Then again, there are ways out: Pathways and ladders create a network through the painting. Ellsworth smiles, pointing out their lines. "She creates room for hopefulness and redemption in her work."

Another dramatic painting in the show is placed at the front of the main gallery, welcoming visitors in with a frank gaze. "Self-Portrait in the Cross Hairs," from 2006, is one of Heffernan's many canvases depicting women in giant headdresses and skirts, scenes both luxurious and unsettling. Here, the lady has her head adorned with chandelier crystals piling up to the top of the canvas. Her skirt is a bouquet of round objects, mixing stone fruits with glowing orbs that could be glass balls or grapes. At her feet are dead fish and dead birds, and two rodents in fisticuffs. Ancient scenes of war rage in the background.

"There's a precariousness to life," Ellsworth says. All of Heffernan's works in the show are oil paintings on canvas except for one. "Self-Portrait as Intrepid Scout Leader," from 2012, is a many-layered archival pigment print incorporating museum board, glass jewels, gold leaf and other materials. It's one of her only prints.

A thousand stories dwell within "Self-Portrait as Broken Home," a 2008 oil of a peculiar sort of apartment building. Rooms are stacked in an organic shape with intriguing actions going on inside: white birds fluttering around a TV, a woman shooting someone, a Christmas tree that spans two rooms through a hole in the floor. There are countless stories waiting to be told by a viewer, and that's an artistic approach that Shenny Cruces can appreciate.

In her "Community Heirloom Project," viewers must craft their own interpretations for the sculptures. Who ate from those dainty plates, wore the kid glove, played with the iron rabbit? The

artist, who works as the ceramics manager at the Richmond Art Center, didn't know what bounty she would reap when she put out the call for the heirlooms. The plastic pineapple piggybank was a treat when it arrived, as were the old meerschaum pipes.

To cast the items, Cruces made a plaster mold of each piece and then poured liquid porcelain inside. "You get this casting, just like a chocolate bunny during Easter," she says in a phone interview. With the porcelain version, "you don't have to have all the details and colors of the original object," she said. "It gives you a hint about what's going on."

Some items were left alone rather than being cast. A pair of horn-rimmed glasses, for instance, looked better as is. A chair is still made mostly of wood, except that Cruces has repaired its broken spindle by creating a new one from porcelain. In some places, she's added gold lacquer.

As Ellsworth noted, Cruces created many repeating arcs in her installation. "I really wanted it to look like a sacred space, like a cathedral," she says. "These objects were obviously important to someone."

As for the pineapple, Cruces isn't sure what it meant. But she enjoys speculating. The bank was from Waikiki Beach, with a hole that could be used for a drinking straw (presumably, before any coins were put inside).

"Maybe it was on their honeymoon," Cruces muses. "Maybe it was the most beautiful place they'd ever been, and this was their souvenir of it."

What: Paintings by Julie Heffernan and sculptures by Shenny Cruces, at the Palo Alto Art Center

Where: 1313 Newell Road, Palo Alto

When: Through Sept. 1. The center is open Tuesday-Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Thursdays from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m., and Sundays from 1 to 5 p.m.

Cost: Free.

Info: Interactive parts of the exhibits feature porcelain keys by Cruces that visitors can take home, and an area where visitors can make collages of patterned magnets that resemble Heffernan's paintings. A closing talk with Shenny Cruces is planned for Aug. 30 from 6 to 9 p.m.

For more, go to cityofpaloalto.org/artcenter or call 650-329-2366. Cruces plans to include some of the stories behind her sculptures at communityheirloom.blogspot.com.