



"Kate's Rapture," acrylic and glitter on glass by Richard Alvarez, on view at Karin Sanders Fine Art in Sag Harbor.

Opinion

Sex and the Spiritual at Karin Sanders

BY JENNIFER LANDES

For a show that bills itself as nothing more than an assemblage of new and relatively new faces, "Fresh Art," at Karin Sanders Fine Art in Sag Harbor, is something much greater than the sum of its parts.

The feminine as figure and symbol, considered in both an iconic and subversive way, is the preoccupation here. And while there is nothing new about that, each artist's exploration of these themes is indeed "fresh" and unique.

Take Richard Alvarez, whose work "Kate's Rapture" greets visitors at the top of the steps. Using pigment and glitter on glass, he produces sexualized busts of women with religious undertones.

There's no mistaking that the sex comes first. Yet Mr. Alvarez's compositions follow a tradition of rapturous faces through the centuries. With no saintly model, artists had to rely on their own experience to envision spiritual ecstasy, and the closest earthly manifestation, even in more devout times, is somewhat baser. Any visitor to Rome who has seen Gian Lorenzo Bernini's Santa Teresa would agree that such a depiction of "rapture" near the altar of Santa Maria della Vittoria is more than a little unsettling.

Mr. Alvarez's bodies and faces are depicted in white and black glitter as if in a perfectly shaded drawing. Red glitter is reserved for the lips and in some cases the roses, a traditional Marian symbol, which also serve as the subjects' hair.

The roses are painted in black in some cases, which drains the composition of life even while promising fecundity with titles such as "Forsaken Heaven to Give You My Love." This image borrows both from high and low, looking as much like a scene from "American Beauty" as a depiction of St. Elizabeth of Hungary.

Sharing the space with Mr. Alvarez is

the work of Orly Cogan, whose compositions are both titillating and sentimental. The artist chooses vintage fabrics and embellishes them with satin and chain-stitch embroidery, crocheted borders, paint, and appliquéd fabric.

"Butterfly Flight" features imagery that could borrow from both the life cycle of a butterfly emerging from a cocoon and Eve emanating from Adam's rib, with figures positioned not unlike Michelangelo's rendering of the subject. The tree nearby and the absence of a serpent, as well as the nude figure emerging from the bikini-clad one, appear to offer a return to Eden heralded by birds, butterflies, and an appliquéd frog at the lower-left corner.

In another composition, a nude figure in wedge sandals stands astride a vacuum cleaner with a serpent-like hose. It is a witty discourse on the feminine and the domestic. In "Wild Poppies," the most frankly sexual composition of the group, the subjects' expressions and gestures have an impassivity similar to a well-known portrait of two sisters by an unknown artist from the School of Fontainebleau. The socks one of them wears, along with the fabric rosette flowers and butterflies, lend an aura of innocence as well as absurdity.

Cara Ober carries over the theme of the feminine, through signifier and convention, into the next room, where her mixed-media compositions employ text, collage, paint, and drawing. "Summertime Skin" includes a dictionary definition of pretty and a rendering of a happy wedding couple apparently borrowed from a 1950s commercial illustration. A poolside scene, flowers, fleur-de-lis, and a bluebird complete this tableau of traditional and sanctioned feminine aspirations to happiness.

In "White," an illustration of a woman stitching on fabric, which is subtitled "fancy work," further communicates some of Ms. Cogan's themes even more literally.

Adding to the conversation is Jill Corson, whose light-box transparency and digital chromogenic prints explore commerce and the quest for enlightenment through the perfect pair of jeans or shoes. Again, one literal visual connection carries over from Ms. Ober's work, with Ms. Corson's photo of an empire-waist gown in a shop window, which the window dresser has embellished with text and an image of grass.

A photo of a Buddha bust in the midst of a commercial setting transforms the implied theme into the concrete. In this context, the sole-searching in the "Hunt for the Right Shoe" takes on a spiritual quality.

Diane Feissel and Michael Souter contribute their own views of the individual's interaction with society and the modern world from a mostly feminine perspective, often a disturbed one.

Ms. Feissel's men are tough prototypes in leather, wielding guns. Her women are studies in emotion and restraint. Both are painted in a way that implies motion, either the subjects' or the painter's or both, telegraphing the mutability and speed of the modern age.

Mr. Souter's "Red Scream" has an agitprop feel about it with its realist photographic image and the obvious color choice. Although the image is contemporary in subject and in its fractured presentation, there is something of Caravaggio's Medusa shield in the screamer's expression, the bunched hair, and the absence of any portion of the body from the neck down.

The exhibit will be on view through June 26.