Artist Peter Xiao grew up in Beijing, China, which he describes in his artist statement as “congested” and filled with “political upheavals.” For this reason he is more interested in painting “humans and their conditions” rather than the classic Chinese subject, nature. His most recent paintings are on display through May, with the works of clay artist Dorothy Beach, at the MidCoast Fine Arts Gallery in the Mississippi Welcome Center in LeClaire, Iowa.

Using acrylic as his medium, Xiao is a figurative painter who does not paint portraits. The subjects in his paintings come from his imagination. Interestingly, his people have no faces, or occasionally only faces of cartoon-like simplicity, as in his painting *Duo*.

This style could be interpreted as a response to communism and the crowded and tense conditions in which Xiao was raised, an expression of the safety of anonymity. Life in a communist country demands survival skills, such as hiding your true feelings, your true self, so as not to get caught by the Authorities. What better way to hide than by being faceless?

Despite their faceless quality, his figures are filled with personality that comes through in their substantial and forceful physicality. Xiao uses strong, bold brush strokes to define his characters, but his use of color is simple and understated. In a couple of paintings, he uses only three colors. In *Her or There*, which depicts two shadowy figures, possibly playing hide-and-seek, he uses only brown, white, and black.

In *Oops*, a painting of a child bent over a large piece of white paper or cloth, the child’s clothes are blue against a black background. The figure raises its hand in a gesture of surprise or despair, as it apparently has marred the paper or cloth in some way.

The only two of Xiao’s paintings that have faces are his two self-portraits, *Grown Limbs* and *The Crack*. In *The Crack*, Xiao echoes Van Gogh in his use of thick, wavy brush strokes in contrasting shades (white on black, light brown on dark brown). The colors he chooses are also reminiscent of Van Gogh, with the bright yellow and blue reminding the viewer of *Sunflowers*. The painting’s figures are stolid and meaty, with broad shoulders. Although the figure clothed in gray has his back turned to the viewer, one is given the impression that he is a reflection of Xiao’s self-portrait staring out of the canvas.

Grown Limbs shows Xiao holding a canvas with what appear to be tree limbs painted on it. I was a little perplexed at this painting, although I appreciated Xiao’s serious face and strong features. I felt more connected to *The Crack*, with Xiao as the reflection of an artist whom he does not resemble. I felt strength of purpose in this painting, as if Xiao were standing up and showing the world that he is not an anonymous statistic, but an artist who’s still just a little shy about completely revealing himself.

Xiao has another series of paintings that appear crowded with both objects and people. *Painters; (on verso) The Sinks, At Work*

, and
Picture Window
are all pictures of artists' studios with painters working in rooms filled with easels and paint supplies. These paintings are many-hued with muted colors that, together with Xiao's use of light and contrast, reflect a different mood in each picture – from tranquil to cheerful.

Painters and *At Work* are painted with cool blues, grays, and greens for a gentle, peaceful image. *Picture Window* features warm oranges, ochres, and reds for a more vibrant aspect.

There is a pleasing compositional balance in his paintings *Oral Muse* and *On & On* – both featuring a female figure on the right and a male figure on the left. All the figures are either standing or sitting at easels. The women are very feminine and vital in their full, pink dresses, while the men are smaller, duller, and painted black.

I had to question what makes women so dominant in these pictures while the men seem of minimal importance. Whatever the reason, I liked these paintings the best; they have a certain levity and whimsicality that struck me.

Dorothy Beach has several different series of ceramics on display. She excels at creating elegant bowls, plates, and trays with attractive glazes in purplish-black, blue-black, and green-blue, all iridescent. One tray she has incised with various patterns such as waves, crosshatching, and a pleasing corncob pattern.

In another rather chic-looking series, Beach has made some striking lidded flower bottles with broad, shiny black bodies and short, narrow necks. She has managed to replicate exotic flower blossoms (like a bird of paradise) as the bottle stoppers. She has marked the bottles with slashes and a zigzag design for a bold effect.

Beach's predominant theme seems to be aquatic. She has on display bowls decorated with shells; small fish dishes; large crabs with goofy eyes; and some cutesy turtles. Like Xiao, she uses colors that tend to be muted – mostly browns, gray/greens, and dark blues. The exception to this is another marine series, which features a large square bowl decorated with leaves, and some small-lidded fish containers. These items are glazed with pleasing light blues and lilacs.

Although I enjoyed Beach's fine pottery, such as her dishware and the truly lovely lidded flower bottles, I found her work to be of uneven quality – ranging from the elegantly shaped and lustrously glazed bowls and trays to pedestrian items such as lumpy frogs, thick, squat palm trees, and odd towers made of globs of unglazed clay.

Still, the MidCoast Gallery has once again put on a pleasant exhibit of both familiar and unusual works of art.