

The Enigmatic Nude: Les Bell, Through October at Leger Gallery

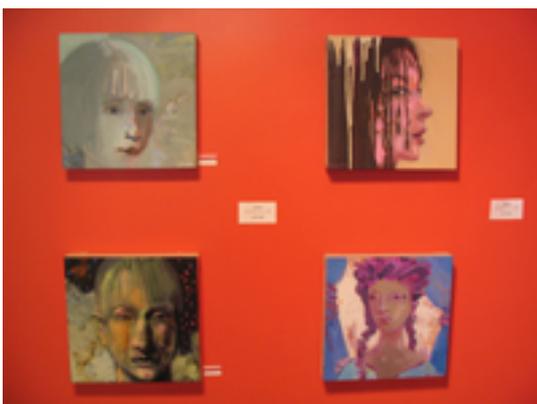
Written by Bruce Carter

Tuesday, 26 September 2006 22:58



Les Bell is well-known in the Quad Cities area for his teaching at St. Ambrose University, his wide intelligence, and his colorful and sensitive use of the nude in his art. There are few artists who can so easily paint the human figure as the primary subject of their work. The new Leger Gallery, in downtown Davenport, is presently hosting a 10-year retrospective of his paintings.

In Bell's world, the nude form is an artistic style, a psychological mystery, and a symbol. He is painting women in their many relationships and roles - from strong to vulnerable, from innocent to wise, and from beautiful to detached. She appears as a nervous young girl looking out from behind a curtain, a busy young woman at the beach on her cell phone, a calm, dark-haired female eyeing her companion, a distressed woman turning away, an intense, worldly lady erotically drying herself on a beach, a shy young girl, a young maiden holding snakes, a waif, a French courtesan, a Spanish dancer, and many more.



At first, the constant presence of the female nude is striking, almost disturbing in her nakedness. But after a few moments, the nudity grows less shocking, the way one hears the beauty beneath a song about love and sex and death. An art student sees the nude model as naked for just a short moment before continuing to work. On one quiet visit to this show, I saw a mother and her young daughter walk slowly through the pictures without comment or surprise, for the paintings radiate an intelligent and beautiful atmosphere that immediately takes us beyond the reality of the images.

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Entering the gallery I felt I had stepped into a world of individual stories of psychological relationships, of enigmatic memories, and of the subconscious dreams of the artist. Each painting called out to me as I walked by, as in the scene in the movie *Amadeus* in which Salieri turned the sheets of Mozart's manuscripts and each page played so powerfully in his ears.

In *There Are No Dumb Animals*, we are confronted with a long-armed nude woman turning away quickly from a red male horse, splattered and decorated like a Haitian ceramic figurine. We feel worried for the woman. Her fingers reach out. Alongside her is pure chaos, painted in a frenzy of bold graffiti energy. The background is a tropical village with dark windows. From the bottom right, two stenciled turtles enter slowly. They act as a scale-shifter and remind us to take our time through the painting.



In *Seer Seen, Scene*, a web-footed nude man leans back in his chair, blindfolded. He seems to be listening to and enjoying his own inner music. A woman sitting near looks on, coolly. They are both placed outdoors, on a black ground. Behind them is a small tree with yellowish fruit or flowers. Before them in the lower right corner of the painting, where Bell gives his clues, is a croquet stick and ball, reminding us to play. This work looks like an allegory for a personal or mythological relationship, but whose? The blindfolded man can be read as a symbol of the inner life, and the cool woman of serene logic and science. Interpretation is cumulative, the way creation is more than the sum of its parts.

As one of only two acrylic paintings in the show, this one has an extra zing because acrylics give the artist a very short time to check with their instincts and to react in the process of painting. Oils allow weeks for reconsideration, because the curing time is so long. With acrylics, mixing and blending on the canvas become a critical skill - a moment's hesitation and they are dry. The painting also demonstrates Bell's skillful use of black - his influences of Manet and Velázquez.

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In *Genre Chaos* we see a young nude woman in pigtails, painted in an 18th Century academic style, turning back curtains to look out from a stage into a cloudy abstract painting. At her feet is a still life of fruit. In the middle, painted in a much smaller scale, a serene young girl stands on a candlestick playing a blue guitar. She seems oblivious to the chaos, absorbed in her musical calm. She dwells in the part of our brain that always creates, no matter what is occurring. The artist takes the chaos of the world and makes it into order, through art. The girl is playing the performer and her performance is her art, revealed on the stage of painting.



Leger's walls are filled with 18 large horizontal canvases. For an interlude, at the back of the gallery, there is a delicious selection of a dozen works of a single face, from many different times and places, each a foot square. The characters are intimate, painted strongly, and immensely satisfying. This grouping is a kind of Greek chorus of portraits, where I felt I was interrupting a conversation between them when I approached.

Bell's paintings call for an extended presence and examination. Their effect is sumptuous and complex, beyond the vibrant colors, the nude forms, and the striking images that burn themselves into us. His paintings are a personal and an intuitive storytelling. His images are allegorical descriptions of deeply common human relationships, and our separate yet similar responses to the world.

Charles Knudsen, the former "Mr. Chuck" of Dick Blick and the Family Museum, is the new maestro/director of Leger Fine Art, located at 228 West Third Street in downtown Davenport. The gallery is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, and the exhibition continues through the end of October.

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