

Art

Group show peeps at public voyeurism

By Edward J. Sozanski
INQUIRER ART CRITIC

Unbecoming," at the Philadelphia Art Alliance, is an intriguing exhibition because it addresses the fascinating issue of public voyeurism, now a common television commodity.

It's not always clear, though, what stance the five artists involved — Elizabeth Campbell, Kara Crombie, Sarah Lucas, Joseph Maida and Connie Walsh — are adopting toward this phenomenon.

Are they simply classifying various strains of voyeurism and exhibitionism, or are they criticizing through parody?

Art Alliance curator Melissa Caldwell asserts that while the three photographers and two video artists make their points through mass media, they remain critical of such spectacles.

That position is easiest to see in Lucas' six photographic "self-portraits." In one, she's sitting, apparently nude, on a toilet, holding its tank like a baby. In another, she poses with two fried eggs, perhaps artificial, placed over her breasts.

Maida simulates invasion of a person's most private domestic spaces, bedroom and bathroom, in his color photos of a male character, "Ben," in situations so obviously staged that they must be intended to undermine the idea of baring all. (Cheeky Ben goes only as far as buttocks.)

In her video installation, Crombie creates a domestic narrative starring herself as three characters — a blonde, a brunette, and a cheerleader with Yves Klein blue hair, wandering among an apartment's four rooms.

Each persona videotapes herself being videotaped while performing a variety of banal tasks, such as playing solitaire. This is solipsism squared.

The other two contributions, by Campbell and Walsh, are more enigmatic. Campbell's photographs of a messy bedroom and of cosmetics and lotions lined up on a dresser document an installation. Something seems to have been lost in the transposition to two dimensions.

Walsh's video installation, *Push*



Kara Crombie stars as three characters in her video installation in the "Unbecoming" exhibition. The domestic narrative has her wandering about an apartment's four rooms and performing ordinary tasks.

Pull, is the most captivating piece in the show — that is, if you're fascinated by the sight of a smartly dressed woman pushing silver-headed pins into her shoulder and ankle.

Push Pull and Campbell's *House* appear to be comments on vanity more than exhibitionism, although certainly the latter trait demands a generous dose of the former.

"Unbecoming" isn't the last word on private acts as public spectacle, but it examines the issue provocatively. The exhibition makes the viewer more sensitive to the ways that privacy barriers are being constantly eroded, voluntarily or not.

Philadelphia Art Alliance, 251 S. 18th St. 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays. Through Sept. 1. 215-545-4302 or www.philartalliance.org.

Idyllic landscapes. Landscapes

are perfect paintings for summer because, on days when rain or smothering heat drives people indoors, they bring nature to you.

Perhaps with this in mind, the Brandywine River Museum has put up the exhibition "A Summer Idyll," which presents more than 70 Brandywine Valley landscapes from its collection.

At least that's what's advertised; many of the paintings, such as George Cope's *Trout in the Brandywine*, aren't landscapes in the strictest sense, and some aren't landscapes at all.

Even allowing for such elasticity, there are enough pure landscapes to demonstrate why the valley has been a magnet for painters since the early 19th century.

The first half of the exhibition is the more engaging, not only because the works are more descriptive but also because they're not often shown. A view of the Lownes Taylor farm by Bass Otis, painted about 1832, is a prime

example of the discoveries to be made.

Another is *Scene in Chester Valley*, a panoramic view painted in 1856 by Edmund Darch Lewis when he was only 21. Clifford Ashley and the Belgian-born Franz de Merlier are two other Brandywine artists of more than passing interest.

Ashley used an impressionist style for his 1919 view of a mill on the Brandywine near the village of Rising Sun. De Merlier's exag-



"Trout in the Brandywine," by George Cope, is in the "Summer Idyll" show.

gerated expressionism produced thickly painted pictures that combine aspects of modernism and regionalism.

The second half of the show brings in a lot of familiar faces, from Horace Pippin to the various Wyeths and several members of the Wyeth circle. The show moves toward more tightly focused subjects, and the viewer begins to feel that it has strayed too far from its ostensible theme.

Brandywine River Museum, Route 1, Chadds Ford. 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. daily. Through Sept. 2. 610-388-2700 or www.brandywinemuseum.org.

Archaeological traces. Experience in archaeological fieldwork has given Karen Oremus a feel for the way fragments can evoke a variety of conditions, especially fragility, decay and metamorphosis.

The intaglio prints that she's showing at the University City Arts League display all those qualities. They're not hard-edge images in the usual sense but residual evidence of process, such as stains, smudges and marks. They imply the erosive action of time or weathering.

Oremus has only four prints in her show, but they're generously sized. The largest, printed on six sheets butted together, is 78 by 82 inches.

The scale allows the subtlety of her delicate staining and understated color — primarily variations of white and off-white — to convey strength and purpose.

Only one print, marked by a prominent rust-colored passage, could be called demonstrative. The others speak in visual whispers. But Oremus not only dares to speak softly, she makes herself heard; it's a commendable achievement.

University City Arts League, 4226 Spruce St. 1 to 6 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays, 1 to 5 p.m. Fridays, 9:30 a.m. to noon Saturdays. Through Aug. 23. 215-382-7811 or www.ucartsleague.org.

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