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#Selfie: AMSET opens its gallery to soul-baring self-portraits of contemporary Texas artists

Posted on January 23, 2014 | By **Beth Rankin**

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Andela Andea, "Hyperion," 2012. Cold Cathode fluorescent lights, caomputer power source, LED computer fans, flex neon, plexiglass, various plastics. Photos by Guiseppe Barranco/cat5

Upon entering the gallery, it's impossible not to notice Adela Andea. Standing 96 inches tall and glowing fiercely, Andea — or rather, the Conroe artist's sculptural representation of herself — commands your attention with cold cathode fluorescent lights and the quiet whirl of LED computer fans. You could stare into her for hours, losing yourself in the lights and connections and subtle movements. I suggest you do. This weekend, the Art Museum of Southeast Texas celebrates the opening of a striking show of self-portraits by contemporary artists with Texas ties — a selfie show, if you will. Can I call it a selfie show? No? I'm going to anyway.

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"I wanted it to be both literal and non-literal self-portraits," said AMSET curator Caitlin Hanson. "Both abstract and representational. I had fun picking the artists." It shows in the final result.

Houston artist Debra Barrera contributed one of my favorite pieces, "Parties on Earth." An everyday convenience store rack is stocked with generic store packaging — nacho, pork rind and hot dog bun bags — that are filled instead with glitter and confetti.

Its whimsy is palpable but its back-story is touching.

"When I was a child, my father would pick me up from school and drive me to the gas station to get snacks on the way home," Barrera said in the show's catalog. "He would get a drink and I could get anything I wanted to eat. This moment was full of anticipation, excitement and joy."

Mirrored and Obscured: Contemporary Texas Self-Portraits

IMAGE 1 OUT OF 15

Guiseppe Barranco

Andela Andea, "Hyperion," 2012. Cold Cathode fluorescent lights, caomputer power source, LED computer fans, flex neon, plexiglass, various plastics.

Many of the self-portraits reference childhood and adolescence, the artists creating visual representations of those childhood moments — both big and small — that become so formative to our growth as adults. When you read the story of each artist and their self-portrait (and I suggest you do), you become inundated with a curious combination of the sacred and the mundane. Take Andea's fun, brightly lit sculpture, a piece that reads, at first, almost like the disco ball in the center of this curious exhibition. Once you read about what you're looking at, your perception of the piece is likely to change quickly.

"At age 13, I was a direct witness to the bloody Romanian Revolution of 1989, which started in my hometown and ended up with the overthrow of the totalitarian regime in Romania," Andea writes. "I experienced the revolution from a physical and traumatic psychological perspective.

"Becoming an adult under the rapid westernization in Romania — and the optimism provided by the democratization of digital technologies during that decade — had a tremendous influence on my choice of embracing the latest technology as my artistic medium."

The artists in this show — all of whom have either lived in, studied in or currently reside in Texas — have created intimate, soul-bearing pieces. For once, we're not only looking at an artist's work, we're looking into the artist themselves, getting a glimpse at what they see when they look at themselves in the mirror each day.

"Most of my life I have avoided confronting my physical image," said Houston artist Sharon Kopriva, who contributed a sculpture and a painting to the show. "Throughout my career, I recall making only one work intended as a mirror image."

Now, in AMSET's gallery, there are two Koprivas — one, a dynamic and chilling sculpture in

papier mache and steel, the other a painting so intimate that looking deeply at it makes one feel a bit voyeuristic.

Galveston artist Ann Wood created a two-part piece just for this installation. In the foreground, a giant pink wolf sits in repose as, behind it, a contemporary portrait of Little Red Riding Hood looks down from the wall.

Wood frequently deals with reoccurring images, pop culture iconography and feminist interpretations of fairy tales.

"Most protagonists in fairy tales are girls, with common themes of lurking danger (if girls stray from the path, the bogey man will get us), learned helplessness (girls must endure any situation while waiting for Prince Charming to rescue/marry us) and family betrayal (evil stepmother)," Wood writes. "That fairy tales generally involve pastoral — but booby-trapped — backgrounds is also appealing to me."

The longer you explore this show of contemporary self-portraits, the more you find the one thing you probably didn't expect to find: yourself.

It takes courage as an artist to pick apart your flaws in a room filled with critics. But, as a viewer, it takes courage to stand before a piece and stare down your own faults, your own failings, your own love handles and back acne and unpaid parking tickets.

But growth — be it personal or creative — rarely comes from comfort.

"Mirrored and Obscured: Contemporary Texas Self-Portraits"

When: Opening reception 6-8 p.m. Friday; on view through May 11

Where: Art Museum of Southeast Texas, 500 Main St., Beaumont

Cost: Free

beth@thecat5.com

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