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The year in fine art

Critic narrows the field to eight exhibitions at local galleries and museums

By Fredric Koepfel
 Contact
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The eight shows mentioned here as the Best Exhibitions of 2006 represent about 15 percent of the shows I looked at this year. The first process of elimination was easy; narrowing the field from about 12 or so to eight was difficult. Those three or four exhibitions still call to me, but sometimes we have to make a decision and stick to it.

Susan Maakestad, "Urban Abstractions," at Clough-Hanson Gallery, Rhodes College, Jan. 20-Feb. 25: Maakestad's eerily calm and stunningly executed little paintings distill the isolation, dread and stark beauty from parking lots, highway interchanges, suburban sidewalks and other scenes of urban existentialism.

Erin Harmon, "Pettest of Pets," at Clough-Hanson gallery, Rhodes College, March 3-March 25: As slick and thin as candy wafers, Harmon's small paintings, juxtaposing realism and dream, took large risks as they slid down a rabbit-hole and transformed perverse myths of femininity and weird fairy tales of sexuality into giddy and cloyingly cute symbols of provocation.

Jon Lee, "Lee's Learning Center," at Jay Etkin Gallery, July 28-Aug. 22: One of the city's most talented young artists and a whiz-bang painter, Jon Lee used his first solo exhibition to grand-standing effect, turning in a dazzling virtuoso performance that drew on his Asian heritage, the pandemonium of contemporary pop culture, tremendous reserves of energy and just about every artistic medium available.

"Accidental Mysteries: Extraordinary Vernacular Photographs from the Collection of John and Teenuh Foster," at the Art Museum of the University of Memphis, Sept. 15-Oct. 21: There was almost no accounting for the strangeness, the uncanniness, the peculiar mysterious power, the compelling emotional and aesthetic appeal of these 60 anonymous images snapped by ordinary people under ordinary -- meaning singular and transcendent -- circumstances.

"Masterpieces from an English County House: The Fitzwilliam Collection," at Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Sept. 16-Dec. 3: This diverse group of paintings, drawn from a collection begun in the mid-17th century and added to until this day, provided a miniature lesson in the potent conjunction of history, politics, wealth and character. I went back twice to see Antony Van Dyck's large, sumptuous and psychologically penetrating portrait of Charles I's French wife, Henrietta Maria, probably the greatest painting to be seen in Memphis all year.

Tad Lauritzen Wright, "The Philosophy of Beauty," at David Lusk Gallery, Oct. 3-Oct. 28: Our Leonardo of collage and Picasso of graffiti filled the large front room at DLG with two groups of works, the "2nd Chance Series" and "Philosophy of Beauty A-J," and thereby created a rare zone of excitement both comic and thoughtful. Beyond Lauritzen Wright's affection for the banalities of pop culture, childhood nostalgia, list-



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 The Commercial Appeal
 From the exhibit "Sleeping Heads Lie," by Wangechi Mutu

making and anagrams lies a deep questioning concern for the boundaries of formalism and the implications of creativity.

Wangechi Mutu, "Sleeping Heads Lie," at Power House, Nov. 10-Dec. 23: Other artists have used the challenging galleries of Power House to advantage, but Kenya-born New York artist Mutu was the first to tame the soaring south space with lines hung with salvaged clothes (almost all black) suspended at different heights; the result was a sense of immense sorrow and mourning, an effect emphasized by the savage, decadent and disturbing "Sleeping Heads Lie" painting-collages displayed in the upstairs north gallery.

"Class of '06," at Lantana Projects, Nov. 11-24. Lantana Projects' first venture into a local, juried exhibition was a smashing success, mingling an impressive array of styles, mediums and approaches by well-known artists, the newly or lingeringly emergent and the as-yet unsung and ever-wishful. The intention is to make this show an annual event; we hope so.

-- Fredric Koepfel, 529-2376

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