

June 19, 1985

Portraits of the Artists

Revealed on Canvas, Disguised in Person

By Mary Battiata
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What a night for navel gazing.

Sixty-five self-portraits by Washington artists, and close to 65 artists, masked for mystery at the Jane Haslem Gallery.

"Is that a woman?" one man asked incredulously as he stared at a wall-sized portrait of a muscular figure, almost nude, its sagging buttocks swathed in sorry-looking briefs, head turned just enough to reveal a receding blond hairline.

The woman on the wall, Washington painter Rebecca Davenport, shook her tinsel wig. "I painted it when I was very down on myself," she said. "I had just broken my hip."

Painter Manon Cleary was dressed in black and gazing at her "Graduation Day: Self Portrait with Mother 1984." In it, she is naked against a background of deep

green. Her ivory arms are bathed in yellow winter light. The head is tilted back, but her features are pursed in an expression her ex-husband called the "fish face." She took the face from a photo made before her divorce.

There was hardly an abstraction to be found; even the landscape painters turned in two eyes, two ears and a mouth. "I haven't done a portrait in 20 years," trilled red-head Kitty Klaidman. In the painting her neat curls blossom into a Neo-Expressionist explosion. "Back then, it was hair pulled back, very severe, terribly serious. I like myself better now."

Painter Fred Folsom put himself in the corner of a sprawling bacchanal called "Sunday at the Park." The "park" is a strip club at the Maryland line. Folsom is the bored face behind the man lifting a T-shirt off a woman balanced on his lap. "Half the

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people are either on pre-release or over at Patuxent," he said.

Artists flipped through an exhibition catalogue to which each had contributed an assessment of Washington's relentlessly self-analyzing art community:

"In Washington, as in other American cities, artists come together in order to hang around decaying semi-industrial parts of town looking for cheap rent, cheap beer and an exhibition every 18 months . . ." opined one artist.

And: "The Washington art community, like all major art communities, is populated by hacks, glory hunters, complainers, whiners, bad

dealers, good dealers . . ." wrote another.

"There is no coherent Washington art scene that I'm aware of . . ." wrote a third.

Most of the paintings were sun-shot and brimming with exuberant color.

The blues were for the artists who didn't make the wall.

"I'm not in the show and I wonder why not," one woman said gloomily as she lifted a petit four from the buffet.

"You have to be very, very good," her friend said matter-of-factly, "and I ain't."

"They didn't ask me," said portraitist Elena Vidotto as she sat alone in the Osuna Gallery next door. "Never mind. One day I'll paint rings around everybody."



Rebecca Davenport, in tinsel wig and mask, stands by her self-portrait.

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