

One suave painter, one Goth sculptor

Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art explores the differences between a pair of Belgian artists in new exhibit Sunday, October 19, 2008

**By MICHAEL J. FRESSOLA
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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- Both of the Belgian artists on exhibit this month in the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art had early training at home (Ghent and Antwerp), finished up in New York (Pratt and the School of Visual Arts) and now work here.

Seemingly meaningless similarities, as it turns out. They inhabit different planets, which is probably part of what Belgian-born Newhouse curator Frank Verpoorten intends to demonstrate by exhibiting two dissimilar countrymen, painter Marc Van Cauwenbergh and sculptor Alexandra Mein.

Ms. Mein makes in-the-round sculptures, assemblages and wall pieces that have an elaborate theatrical/Goth sense of themselves. Van Cauwenbergh, an abstract painter, continues a conversation something like that of mid-century American painter Morris Lewis. Where Lewis often seemed guileless, the Belgian painter is the personification of suaveness.

His large canvases usually contain a smooth vertical arrangement of colors -- some opaque, some thin. Titles presumably arrive after the fact and they are the tip-off.

"Spring" has some fresh shades of new green. "Skeletal Sky" has some bony action. "Spiraling" has a silvery dervish unfurling in the middle of it.

This kind of literal-mindedness would seem cheesy if Van Cauwenbergh weren't such a master craftsman. His dry, smooth veils, blobs, pools and stripes sink right into the unprimed, raw linen with visible grace.

The approach turns aggressively unpretty shades, shoulder to shoulder, into a picture you're unexpectedly happy to see.

Ms. Mein's sense of theater -- filmmaker Tim Burton should pull her right into his organization -- runs toward black, glistening asteroid-like suspended forms and semi-dismembered humanoids strewn about the floor of the gallery.

One terrific stroke is the little crowd of eight-inch-tall long-legged crab creatures swarming out of a corner of the gallery, as if they had just broken into the building and are running for cover.

The "body" of these creatures seems to be only the thin roundish section of shell from the center of an ordinary local blue claw crab.

The artist produced the long ostrich legs and clown feet.

In a numbered series called "Memory," one piece has a sharp sense of humor: It looks just like a huge glittering gray hairball.

Magical realism, memories and the subconscious vie for pride of place in the encased curiosity that consists of a tiny baptismal gown, butterflies and wisps of synthetic hair.

"Marc Van Cauwenbergh" and "Alexandra Mein" continue through Nov. 16 at the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art at Snug Harbor Cultural Center and Botanical Garden, 1000 Richmond Terr., Livingston.

Gallery hours are Tuesday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

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