



A Tweet for Michelangelo

SURFACE TREATMENT

What: "Birds, Beasts, and the Saint Who loved Them: Drawings by Berry Fritz"
Where: UVAL, Kika de la Garza Fine Arts Center, 921 E 12th Street, Mission
When: Through June 2, 2018
Hours: 10am to 6pm Tuesday to Friday, 2-5pm Saturday
Contact: (956) 583-2787

Drawings that speak sfumato

Oil painter Berry Fritz presents an unexpected series of drawings that demonstrate another side to her art

BY NANCY MOYER

SPECIAL TO THE MONITOR

This marks the first time that Berry Fritz has had an exhibition of her drawings; we know her as an accomplished oil painter. "Birds, Beasts, and the Saint Who loved Them", on display at UVAL, is a collection of twenty-three works including pencil drawings, a token representation of three small oil paintings, a surprising trompe l'oeil still life painting, and installations of successfully abandoned bird nests. A brief variety of animals, birds – mostly sparrows – and St. Francis of Assisi are her subjects. Although Fritz imbues all her subjects with a personal warmth, what is immediately striking about the drawings is their visual sense of softness. The combination draws us in. Fritz is an artist whose oil paintings have always connected brilliantly with master artists of the past, and that pattern continues with drawings expressing the traditional technique of sfumato, one of four canonical painting modes of Renaissance art. "Sfumato" means to "evaporate like smoke", referring to a shading method that produces soft imperceptible transitions between colors and tones. Leonardo da Vinci aptly described sfumato as being "without lines or borders in the manner of smoke, or beyond the focus plane".

Indeed, these drawings by Fritz appear to have been drawn with a vapor, gently forming descriptions of her subjects. Most of the works stay in a mid-tonal range that enhances the soft,

smoky vision. For the St. Francis series Fritz has imagined the Saint in probable situations with birds and beasts as in “Feeding the Chickens”, where he is depicted in his tattered robe with four chickens and a small bird. Notably, in this drawing, the chickens are richly drawn with colored pencil, imbuing them with a sense of importance amidst the group of achromatic sfumato images. This is the only one in the series of five St. Francis drawings that has color. Fritz admitted that St. Francis has been on her mind for years. “I grew up in the Catholic Church and I was smothered in Saints,” she said. “For this exhibit, I thought of working some figures or animals in with St. Francis.” A friend who had given a talk on the Saint agreed to pose for the drawings. “I gave him a Roman nose and a tonsure and a beard.” She continued, “and then I used my statuette for the robe. A photo of his actual robe is displayed. “

The sparrows that appear often in these drawings are a part of her life. “I feed them every morning,” she said. “I’m not a bird watcher; I don’t want to get into all the details. I just enjoy the ones that come to my yard.” Acknowledging them as an introduction to the other drawings, “A Tweet for Michelangelo” speaks of whimsy, which is often found in this artist’s works, but also reinforces the Biblical canon, the Renaissance, and pulls us into contemporary word usage all at once. Fritz’s use of whimsy occurs throughout the collection, such as in “Cat and Mouse”, in which a mouse gazes upon the deathly skull of a cat.

“As a painter, drawing for me has always been a means to an end;” Fritz posited, “planning the composition with thumbnail sketches, laying out the content of the painting, or sorting out a complicated passage with a side sketch. Now, with this exhibition, I am trying to give the art of drawing its due.”

Nancy Moyer, Professor Emerita of Art, UTRGV, is an art critic for The Monitor. She may be reached at nmoyer@rgv.rr.com