

THE CENTER OF OUR



WORLD

Vegas artists make their presence known with the '702 Series'

BY AMY SCHMIDT • PORTRAITS BY CHRISTOPHER SMITH

JUST IN CASE OVER THE PAST YEAR YOU DIDN'T CATCH Michael Reafsnnyder's trippy, drippy abstract expressionism or John McCracken's slick fiberglass surfaces or Cindy Wright's oil depictions of chopped meat at the Las Vegas Art Museum, there's a new mission under way: "to engage visitors in the international culture of contemporary art" and thereby establishing Las Vegas' rep as a player in that rarefied world.

What's more, local contemporary artists are going to be at the heart of that lofty pursuit. Starting in December, the new director at the half-century-old museum, Libby Lumpkin, will institute the "702 Series." These modest-size shows will run alongside larger exhibitions (Frank Gehry, Kaz Oshiro) in order to introduce important Las Vegas artists to the community. Surprisingly maybe to even those who live here in the 702 area code, there's no shortage of talent to fill the bill. The only obstacle has been scheduling.

"They have such active and successful international careers," Lumpkin playfully laments, "there's no time for their old pal Libby."

The standards for admission to this club are not low by any means. Featured artists must either have been born in Las Vegas, have their practice here or have earned an advanced degree here. But they must also exhibit regularly in prestigious galleries in New York and Los Angeles. If that doesn't eliminate most folks, their "work must be engaged in the philosophical discourse of contemporary art and be of a quality and sophistication that merits international exposure."

If that idea takes awhile to digest, Lumpkin has enough 702 artists who qualify that she can "easily schedule the next 10 years." In fact, the LVAM—celebrating its 10th year in the West Sahara Library—will host a major exhibition in fall 2007 called *Las Vegas Diaspora 1990-2003*. Organized by art critic and curator Dave Hickey (Lumpkin's husband), *Diaspora* will showcase artists who have achieved national and international reps after earning advanced degrees at UNLV during Hickey's tenure in the MFA department.

Meantime, "702" will begin showcasing the talent. Here are the first three artists who will exhibit.



Folkloric Sweetness

FROM THE BIRTH OF A CHILD TO THE LOSS OF A PARENT, RANDI CHAPLIN documents the blessings and pitfalls of everyday life to create sparkling, dreamlike canvases that dig up deeper emotions than the outright sentimentality that shines through at first glance.

She “paints what she knows and what is close to her heart,” says Lumpkin. By using color, texture, pattern and symbol, she “mixes earnest sentimentality, domestic politics and religious devotion in fantastical compositions. The figures in her paintings often represent family members, presented with almost childlike straightforwardness.”

This childlike quality makes her paintings seem euphoric even when they deal with less-than-harmonious issues. And that’s exactly the point.

“You have to create your own sense of euphoria,” Chaplin says. “Slow down and remember to breathe, and stop and look at what’s around you. The sun is shining, the mountains are beautiful ...”

Sure it’s sentimental, but Chaplin brushes aside comments that her work is *too* sentimental: “Sentimentality is what gets you through.”

Plus, she’s used to it. After studying art at Cal State-Northridge and Otis Parsons, where she encountered her fair share of naysayers, Chaplin received her MFA from the University of Miami. Under the tutelage of Associate Professor Brian Curtis, she “agreed to go back to the fundamentals.” It was only then that Chaplin, who grew up in Las Vegas and returned here two years ago, found her “voice.”

“It’s been a long haul,” she sighs.

The former installation artist now focuses



solely on her paintings, which explore the “human psyche’s ability to self-nurture, capturing the joys and struggles that are a natural part of life,” says Lumpkin in describing her work. “Dresses become human forms full of emotion. Phallic pacifiers and penises signify pacification, fertility and sexuality. Flowers bloom. Birds are messengers.”

“The highly saturated palette and dreamlike configurations bring to mind the mystical works of the French symbolist Odilon Redon, the expressive sentimentality evokes the Russian-born artist Marc Chagall’s folkloric sweetness,” Lumpkin says, “while the exuberance of the painterly style gives Chaplin’s paintings an American edge.”

Chaplin has been featured in group and solo exhibitions in New York, Miami, Buenos Aires, Portland and Los Angeles. Her upcoming exhibit at the LVAM, beginning December 13, will coincide with another emotional artist, Frank Gehry.

“I just feel fortunate that people seem to like what I am doing.”