



FROM THE ARTIST

A section of Jaimie Warren's five-screen video rendition of a Fra Angelico altarpiece features her friends in the roles of angels, saints, Dominicans and a smattering of celebrities, including Kenny G, Tina Turner and Adele.

ARTSPACE PLAYS WITH THE PAST

Historical masterworks inspire contemporary commentary in 'Saints Stars & Selfies.'

By ALICE THORSON
The Kansas City Star

Entering the darkened second-floor gallery at Block Artspace, one confronts a panorama of swaying haloed figures, dramatically arrayed against glimmering gold curtains.

It looks like a Renaissance altarpiece come to life, but Jaimie Warren's five-screen video re-creation of Fra Angelico's "Predella for the High Altarpiece of San Domenico, Fiesole" takes a few liberties with the sacred communion of its 15th-century model.

Interspersed with the saints, angels, biblical figures and Dominicans portrayed in Fra Angelico's historic work are a wide range of pop culture figures, from Mr. Peanut and Elvira to Betty Boop and Miss Piggy.

You can hear this gathering before you see it, delivering a decidedly reedy chorus of the 1980s pop hit "That's What Friends Are For."

The overall effect is as touching as it is bizarre, making this 4-minute, 15-second work an ambitious addition to Warren's long-running celebration of the importance of community.

Warren's video is the highlight of "Saints Stars & Selfies," a group show of pieces inspired by historical masterworks.

Curated by Block Artspace director Raechell Smith, the exhibit features a global roster of artists, including Mexican-born Juan Capistran, Amsterdam-based Hendrik Kerstens and American artists Kehinde Wiley and Nina Katchadourian.

Smith and Warren, who now divides her time between KC and Brooklyn, go way back.

As a student, Warren worked at Block Artspace. And Smith curated the 2009 Charlotte Street Foundation Visual Artist Awards show, in which Warren showed rambunctious photographic self-portraits and videos of her wildly antic Whoop Dee Doo community talent show.

Smith wanted Kansas City to get the first look at Warren's new work, which, in addition to the videos, includes large-format C-prints offering an updated and irreverent take on Pablo Picasso's "Damoiselles d'Avignon" and two paintings by 19th-century French academic painter William-Adolphe Bouguereau.

Warren has built a global resume and is the recipient of the 2014 Baum Award for an Emerging American Photographer from the Baum Foundation and SF Camera-work in San Francisco, where she will open a one-person exhibition April 30.

Real people, real interactions

The very amateurishness of Warren's video production adds to its appeal. Shot during three sessions in Epperson Auditorium at the Kansas City Art Institute, it feels genuine, like a children's school play.

The five videos took all last summer, Warren said.

"The piece itself features a total of more than 100 people; another 25 to 30 people helped in the production," she said. "I emailed



FROM THE ARTIST

The gridded floor works of celebrated minimalist Carl Andre inspired L.A.-based Juan Capistran to create the streetwise "We Are Family" (2001) out of red and blue bandannas.



FROM THE ARTIST

Liane Lang's "Fellow Travelers" (2012) shows one of her lifelike figurative sculptures within an enormous communist statue in Budapest's Memento Park.

everyone I know. It's all friends and friends of friends. We found or created all the costumes and made most of the wigs and props."

Warren's co-director, Matt Roche, made the sound and recorded the audio.

"It's my favorite song," Warren said. "It was a really beautiful thing, everybody practicing singing that song together."

The artist brought a light touch to her role as director.

"There's tons going on with the saints and angels and celebrities interacting in small ways," she said. "Basically, I would encourage people to embody their character. Some of the saints are holding the instruments of their martyrdom. There was a handful of little things I wanted to happen."

At one point, a yellow-raincoated couple, lifted from "Singing in the Rain," kiss.

As with the videos, Warren staged her large-format photographs with real people.

Presented as a digital print on vinyl, "Self-Portrait as a Bulls Fan in La Jeunesse de Bacchus by William-Adolphe Bouguereau" measures 8 by 14 feet.

"It's the biggest photo I've done," Warren said. The shot was done at

Studios Inc.'s gallery. "It includes an actual donkey and a miniature horse. There are three children, two babies, one teen and 19 adults."

The work's title includes a long parenthetical "(Michael Jordan Basketball Painting by Dossyod of the Independents)," which is a clue to her photograph's genesis. Contrary to what one would think, her photograph does not depict a staging of the Bouguereau painting, but re-creates a Photoshopped version of it created by Dossyod. You can see it at freakingnews.com.

"There are these weird Photoshop contest websites," Warren said, with "these really strange Photoshop pieces, often altering works from art history. I'm finding these Photoshopped images and re-creating them as self-portraits without using Photoshop. There's always an odd user name; I credit that person in the title."

Warren's version of Dossyod's image features herself, dressed in a floor-length Bull's jersey with a slit up the side, at the center of the composition.

For drama, digital engagement and just plain high jinks, hers is a hard act to follow. While sharing Warren's penchant for stagecraft

and costumes, the rest of the work in the show appears somewhat staid by comparison.

The intersection of art and commentary

Both Kerstens and Katchadourian play with traditions of Dutch portraiture.

Kerstens' large color photographs of his daughter endow her with the sweetness and gravitas of Dutch Master portraits, thanks to deft lighting, poses and inventive props, including a Slinky-like white air duct enlisted as a ruff.

Katchadourian achieves a similar effect with a more ad hoc approach, taking selfies in airplane lavatories where she fashions hats and collars from ready-at-hand tissues and towels.

Although Katchadourian and her dealer lent the "Lavatory Self-Portraits," many of the works in the exhibit were borrowed from local collectors, including a Kerstens from Byron Cohen Gallery and works by Vik Muniz and Kehinde Wiley from John and Sharon Hoffman.

Their Wiley, an imposing 8-by-6-foot portrait titled "St. Adrian" (2006), exemplifies the artist's portrayal of contemporary young black men in power poses borrowed from historical portraits of white male rulers and land owners.

The Hoffman painting is one from a series of saints. Wiley portrays the young man conscripted into St. Adrian's role with an anvil, but this version of the anvil on which the saint was hammered to death is the glistening gold of hip-hop bling. Its prominent role in the picture also serves as a reminder of the culture of violence that surrounds young black men.

"There are a couple of artists making 20th-century references," Smith said. "I was looking for moments when art history and pop culture came together for an artist."

Kansas City Art Institute alum Mark Newport, now head of fiber at Cranbrook Academy in Michigan, nods to Frederic Remington's painting "The Scout" in his eponymous ink jet print showing himself



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND CATHARINE CLARK GALLERY

Nina Katchadourian's "Lavatory Self-Portrait in the Flemish Style #2" (2010) is one of a series of selfies she created in airplane lavatories.

ON DISPLAY

"Saints Stars & Selfies" continues at the H&R Block Artspace at the Kansas City Art Institute, 16 E. 43rd St., through April 2. Hours are noon-5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday and 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday. For more information, 816-561-5563 or kcai.edu/artspace.

performing the role of the Indian scout on horseback.

As Smith explained, "He was teaching in Arizona at the time and finding a way to comment on border politics. (He began) costuming up and doing performances where he's looking out over the horizon."

There is also a performance dimension to the photographs of German-born, London-based Liane Lang. The artist posed lifelike sculptures of figures with the enormous Communist statues and monuments that were moved from their original locations in Budapest, Hungary, to the city's Memento Park, an outdoor museum that opened in 1993.

"There's a critique, but it's playful," said Smith, who was drawn to the work when she met the artist during a visit to the Omi International Arts Center in Ghent, N.Y., last summer.

The same applies to what New York artist Kathleen Gilje calls her "contemporary restorations" of Old Master paintings, including "Hercules & Omphale, Restored" (2001).

Gilje's version of Francois Boucher's erotic depiction of Hercules with the queen, who took him as a lover but also made him dress as a woman and perform other unmanly activities, is an accomplished copy, befitting her many years working as a professional art restorer.

The provocative work takes an even more intriguing turn through an act of substitution. Gilje removed the sculptural medallion in the background of the Boucher and inserted an image of contemporary artist Bruce Nauman's celebrated neon work "The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths."

Might those have to do with the age-old power relations between women and men?

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