

Visual art

A push toward goodness

EthnicArt show combines photos and paintings linked by a love of humanity.

By TANYA HARTMAN
Special to The Star

EthnicArt Gallery is at 59th Street and Troost Avenue. Run by Ronald Chaney, the gallery is above a U-Haul rental facility and a beauty supply store, accessed via a flight of well-worn, carpeted stairs.

Here you will find no pretense. What you will find is the passionate conviction that art has the power to elicit thoughtful interchange and connection. The focus is on ideas.

REVIEW

The exhibition, titled "Conversation on Troost," was curated by Chaney and Anna Maria Kretzer, and pairs luminous photographs by Gloria Baker Feinstein with expressive paintings by Harold Smith. The juxtaposition of the two artists works conceptually, because each brings perspective to the experience of being a minority.

Feinstein grew up in Kentucky, and as a Jewish child experienced anti-Semitism, which, she said in an interview, "made me root for the underdog." Smith, who is African-American, says his series, "Man of Color," was also inspired by his experiences.

He described a recent incident in which he went to see the movie "Godzilla" and sat near a white woman and her son. When Smith sat down, the boy pulled his bag closer to him.

Similarly, when the artist walks through Oak Park Mall, he sees women clutch their purses.

"From the time you wake up until the time you go to sleep, you suffer the frustrations and disenfranchisement of the African-American experience," he said.

How, then, can an artist use both pain and the empathy often engendered by suffering in visual expression? For Feinstein, the camera and photography make her "fearless," willing to travel the world to docu-

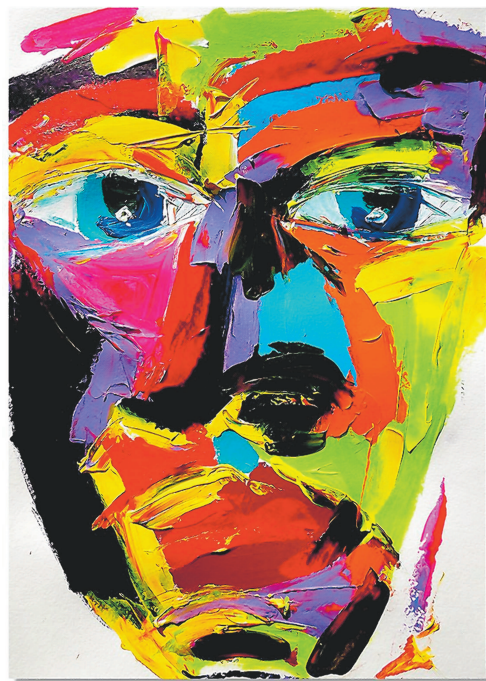
ment the human condition in all its permutations.

In 2006, she went to Uganda for a workshop on taking photographs for non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Each participant chose a theme, and Feinstein's was the plight of AIDS orphans.

One orphanage stuck with her, and when Feinstein returned home, she "couldn't just put the photographs away into a portfolio." Within five months, she had set up a nonprofit called Change the Truth to help the children.

Feinstein has since photo-

graphed the orphans as well as other Ugandan citizens. And she gets close to her subjects, sleeping with the kids in their dorms at night and listening to "their coughs, their breathing and the tinkle of their urine in the bucket in the corner."



"Conversation on Troost" includes these vivid portraits by Harold Smith.

FROM THE ARTISTS



Gloria Baker Feinstein's "Woman in Taxi," above, and "Two Men in Chairs," at left.

On exhibit

"Conversation on Troost" continues at EthnicArt, 5930 Troost Ave., through June 20. Hours are 4-6 p.m. Friday, noon-6 p.m. Saturday and by appointment.

For more information, call 816-399-8037 or email rchan527@aol.com.

This willingness to be intimate and present with her subjects suffuses her work with moral clarity and aesthetic beauty. In one photo, titled "Woman in Taxi" (2013), a gorgeous young woman stares through the glass of a taxi's window, her face reflecting the raindrops on its surface. Feinstein's photos dare us not to care, while revealing the boundless beauty of a world too often glimpsed rather than studied.

Also on display are photographs taken at African-American barbershops along Troost and in neighborhoods around Kansas City. Each image is saturated in the artist's love for humanity.

Smith, a high school computer teacher, paints vivid portraits of (mostly) African-Americans of his imagination. The self-taught artist lashes his acrylic paint into emotionally charged instants that aggregate into likenesses. The work successfully expresses inner turmoil, depth and inquiry into the complexity of human behavior.

Feinstein shares a Ugandan fable in which a small boy encounters a beach covered in starfish. Unwilling to watch them die, he begins the arduous task of tossing each one back into the water. An older man approaches and tells the boy that he cannot possibly save them all. "Well," he comments, tossing one more starfish back into the water, "I just saved this one."

Each of these artists, through formal and aesthetic means, is like that boy, doing what he and she can to push the balance of the world toward goodness.