

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Women's Bodies as Art, Wrinkles and All

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

Feminist art can be solemn and earnest, which often limits its appeal. The same cannot be said of "Eccentric Bodies," a group exhibition by women artists working with the female nude at the Mason Gross School of the Arts Galleries in New Brunswick. It is a handsome show that nicely balances ideology and artistic flair.

ART REVIEW

"Eccentric Bodies" is organized by the veteran feminist campaigners Judith K. Brodsky and Ferris Olin. Their aim, put forward in the exhibition catalog, is to highlight several women artists, most in their 60s and

"Eccentric Bodies," Mason Gross School of the Arts Galleries, Rutgers University, Civic Square, 33 Livingston Avenue, New Brunswick, through Aug. 3. Information: (732) 932-2222, extension 811, or at brodskycenter.org.

70s, who are exploring issues of aging, identity and physical change, often in self-portraits. It is confrontational stuff, though much of it has genuine gravity and feeling, and might remind you of the late self-portraits of Rembrandt.

A messy, semi-abstract painting by the New York artist Brenda Goodman of a female figure slumped in a chair, stuffing cookies into her mouth, stands on a tiny patch of wall outside the exhibition. The picture is funny, but the gluttonous eating also suggests obsession, perhaps even an eating disorder. It is a brutal self-portrait painted by the artist in 1994 at a low point in her battle with obesity.

This tough, pitiless picture led Ms. Goodman to begin a series of paintings of the middle-aged female body; around a dozen of them fill the show's central room. They are sensitive but frank (several are full frontal nudes), the artist sometimes wearing a

mask as if to comfort herself with a minimal disguise. They are also oddly reassuring, for Ms. Goodman appears to have become more comfortable with herself and her body.

Among other artists' works, there is an early video by the French artist Orlan showing her having cosmetic facial surgery, seen up close in gory detail, overlaid with a soundtrack of her reading from French postmodern philosophy. The whole thing is so pretentious that it is hard not to laugh, but the artist, with her history of making political works about the female body, is an obvious inclusion here.

Bailey Doogan is a figurative artist from Arizona who uses images of her body and that of other middle-aged women to make statements about aging. Here she has a series of immense abraded charcoal drawings made by coating the surface of the paper with charcoal, then scratching portions of it away with an etching needle and other sharp instruments to create detailed, resonant images.

Some of Ms. Doogan's drawings look like something out of a life drawing class in art school, which is not a particularly good thing. But with their impressive combination of tonal subtlety and technical precision they look more like photorealist paintings,

or photographs. The best of them are as close as drawing can get to realism.

The back room contains the contribution of Harriet Casdin-Silver of Boston, a pair of creepy but brilliant holograms of obese, elderly women and hermaphrodites. The sculptural installations are marvels of optical technology; from certain angles, they create the impression that there is a person alternatively suspended in liquid or standing in silence inside a cavity in the wall. The monstrousness of the figures is meant to reference changes in the body caused by aging.

The exhibition's theme also lends itself to the celebration of beauty. The photographer Ernestine Ruben of Princeton takes close-ups of youthful bodies in intimate poses, legs entwined or bellies pressed together. Their sensuality is a relief after one has looked at so much saggy, wrinkled flesh; then again, maybe that reaction just goes to show how mainstream art and the media limit our perception of the female body.

IDENTITY "Heroes," by Linda Stein, part of a show that balances ideology and flair.

