ART GALLERIES ART NOTES

Abundant emotion present in Lowly's art

By Lauren Viera
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When does the emotional context behind one's art supersede the aesthetic? Should it ever? For Tim Lowly, whose work is on display in a solo show at Gescheidle, emotion and aesthetics have always been inseparable. Save for one, the paintings in "Too Close For Comfort" depict members of Lowly's family (including one self-portrait), and the narratives behind each are as moving as the work is beautiful.

Though "Too Close for Comfort" appears to be sparse--there are just five paintings in the exhibition room, the largest of which is 24-by-16 inches--vacant wall space and strategic lighting are instrumental in emphasizing the show's intimacy. The collection is secluded in the gallery's furthest corner annex, itself a cozy retreat.

"These are small paintings of people seen usually in fairly close proximity, in interior spaces," Lowly explains via telephone from his Lincoln Square home. "I was thinking about the relationship between physical distance and temporal distance. Those are things that are references to intimacy in a psychological sense."

The name "Too Close For Comfort," however, does not wholly refer to distance in the literal sense. Rather, the show is named for the emotional framework through which the paintings were conceived.

"The events that surround the images are significant to me. They probably would be lost on the average viewer," says Lowly. "[This show] is kind of an experiment in my sharing something that is almost too close to comfort."

Unwittingly, viewers might presume that these paintings are simple family

portraits: there is a father holding a newborn baby ("Beyond"), a mother and baby ("Between"), a grandfatherly figure at rest ("Fade to Light"), and two portraits of young girls ("Sleep" and "Wrapped"). Each looks slightly ethereal, a result of the paintings' interpretations of photographic images. Together, these works' otherworldly composure make a beautiful, three-dimensional family album.

But Lowly's family is atypical. Though some of Lowly's early paintings illustrate images from South Korea, where he spent his adolescence, he has in recent years been repeatedly drawn to a subject very close to his heart: his 19-year-old daughter, Temma, who is severely disabled. "Between" was painted from an old photograph taken one day after Temma's birth--and one day before she suffered cardiac arrest. "Fade" was painted from a photograph taken shortly before Lowly's father died. The young girls in "Sleep" and "Wrapped" are again Lowly's daughter, who is cortically blind (unable to see despite seemingly normal eyes).

Though some of the photographs used for reference are nearly 20 years old, every painting in "Too Close For Comfort" was completed this year--one of them, "Smile," which hangs in Gescheilde's reception area, was completed the day of the show's opening.

Lowly, who is gallery director, art faculty member and artist-in-residence at North Park University, is nothing short of prolific. Sometimes, he says, it just takes a while to figure out whether a particular photograph has what he hopes will make a successful painting.

"Part of what interests me in this exhibition is that these paintings could not have been done from life," says Lowly. "I wanted to do paintings about myself, my wife and my daughter relating to events that happened 20 years ago. It would be impossible to paint those from life now, but with a photograph, you can build a work of art on an image."

Though Lowly's flawless presentation effectively masks the story behind this show's works, he believes that there is always an inevitable concept on which works are based.

"We are who we are," says Lowly. "It's going to come through in our work whether we want it to or not. What is much more important in life is what each person brings to the work from their own experience. For some people, viewing this kind of work is painful; for others it speaks about family or home. [How others] read it is out of my control, but I welcome the opportunity for the interested viewer."

Tim Lowly, `Too Close for Comfort'

When: Through November 27

Where: Gescheidle, 118 N. Peoria St.,4th floor

Price: Free; 312-226-3500

Tim Lowly will perform musical works in accompaniment to "Too Close For Comfort" at 7:30 p.m. Friday at Gescheidle, 118 N. Peoria St., 4th floor, 312-226-3500.

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