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MUSEUMS

Art with a story

Bonath's works ask viewer to speculate on the subject

By Dianne Zuckerman
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John Bonath's compelling work first caught my eye in 1998, with "Homeless in Denver, Homage to Father Woody," a photographic mural that sought to dispel stereotypical images of the homeless. The artistically composed piece, which toured the Denver area, presented its subjects with a sense of dignity and individuality, elements that grace other works in "John Bonath, selected images: 1970-2000."

The retrospective, at the recently opened Aperture Gallery, includes 110 works ranging in price from \$100 to \$2,300. Bonath's focus has always been on combining photography and fine art. Back in the early '70s, he already had begun experimenting with meticulously assembled pieces such as "Directional Grasses," 400 tiny, blue-toned images of grass bending every which way, creating an abstract effect that suggests atmospheric swirls or ocean swells.

In addition to Bonath's technical mastery, a strength of his work is that every image suggests a story and invites the viewer to speculate on the subject. He also excels at establishing a mood and capturing personalities, from an erotic image of a pear to a playful, gracefully composed portrait of three Thai boys.

One of Bonath's best-known works, written up in several European publications, is the "Blessings" series, digital constructions that draw on spiritual and allegorical material. "Blessings #12, Casey's First Day in Paradise," centers on a picture of Bonath's 2-day-old son cuddled against a symbolic, life-green leaf, with well-placed butterflies and hands adding to the sense of protection and peace.

"Anna #2," a silver print from the series "Mastectomy, lyrical studies of two women," is one the most powerful images, filled with stark dignity as it records the nude form of a woman post-surgery, post-chemotherapy. "Eve," shows to her pregnant belly, face filled with Mona Lisa impenetrability.

More than a few pieces have a surrealist look. "Passage from an Untold Fairy Tale," a striking mixed media work, features a male with distinctively made-up eyes reminiscent of the chilling punk in "A Clockwork Orange." Adding to the effect, frogs perch on his shoulder and climb the picture's frame. "Emily and the Fish," suggests another nightmarish tale, as a small, sleeping girl floats in a black void, her curled form pursued by a huge, hostile fish.

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'Grandmother With Cabbage' is a silver print from the 'Japanese' portfolio.



'Delaware Water Gap Family Portrait' is a photo-emulsion on egg shells.