

ARTS SPACE

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Ansen-Seale's Square Root of Evil

Apocalypse: soon Local artists visualize Y2K anxiety

BY JOHN EWING

This holiday season, millennial malaise could turn the ordinary stomach-ache into a full-blown panic attack, as traffic through San Antonio International Airport confronts the long awaited Y2000. Although the new millennium doesn't officially begin for another year, much of the computerized world is hanging its fate on that strange new number that enters public domain on January 1. From personal goals to end-time prophecies, our collective ruminations on Y2K have amounted to one long, held breath. In two airport corridors, 36 local artists let some of the air out, offering travelers a creative release for pent-up angst and a window into the San Antonio arts community at the end of the 20th century.

"Art2KpaSA?," on exhibit through February 29 in Terminals 1 and 2, is curated by Michael Mehl and sponsored in part by the City's Office of Cultural Affairs. A reflection of the public at large, this selection of work is a widely varied sample of attitudes about the coming millennium. In sculpture, painting, photography, and multi-media assemblages, these artists have unintentionally clustered around the same topics that engage the rest of us: history, spirituality, social accountability, and personal security. With few guidelines other than size requirements, the works range in tone from offbeat hilarity to the downright dire.

One group taps into the tabloid-style obsession with Y2K as a fixed date of either ill portent or great change. Ansen Seale's photomontage entitled *Square Root of Evil* takes a U.S. Patent document for "verifying human identity during electronic sales transactions" and surrounds it with beautiful magazine models. Each has a bar code stamped

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on her forehead, while below a prophetic passage from the Book of Revelations references 666 as the "mark of the Beast."

Rolando Briseño's *Black Hole* depicts a salsa verde cosmos that sucks roasted chicken, dishes, a gingham tablecloth, and the TV remote into its spiraling vortex. Elsewhere, Robin Urton's multi-paneled painting, *New World Portal*, shows figures moving through a mechanized gateway into a utopian cityscape.

Other artists respond to the coming millennium with heightened spirituality. Glazed in gold and mauve, Susan Budge's *Millennium Goddess* is an abstract ceramic sculpture that suggests the female figure, but the object privileges female mythos over actual representation. Ramin Samandari and Deborah Keller collaborated on *Arcanum 17*, a grouping of four hand-tinted photographs. Each presents a young woman in a natural setting pouring water from a pitcher, a reference to a renewal figure from the Tarot deck. *Doubly Dark*, another collaboration by Suzanne Paquette and Don Lindblad (aka Art Gard), is constructed with sheets of black, textured rubber. The top "skin" is cut and peeled back to reveal the contrasting layers beneath, a quietly powerful emblem of deep, psycho-spiritual analysis.

For some artists, the exhibition has provided a chance to consider the sweep of history and its effect on the social order. Cakky Brawley's *Rest* is a geologic "record" of social movements. Seen through the clear side of a cabinet, layers of materials form evocative strata: rocks, toy soldiers, seeds, red velvet, more soldiers, more velvet, pills, money, etc. The cabinet is crowned with an ornate chaise longue, a shrewd metaphor for history's slow, incremental weight and each generation's beckoning of the new. Similarly astute, Angel Rodríguez-Díaz' painting, *San Antonio at*

the Turn of the Century, plays with our perceptions of history. Visually simple, the image is a group of objects on a lace-covered table: post cards, money, ceramic tchotchkes, novena candles, folk-art objects, maps. But is the image circa 1899 or 1999? Like San Antonio itself, the picture's frame of reference slips back and forth, as unfixed and incomplete as the partial view of the artist reflected in the hand mirror on the table.

The new millennium offers a moment of personal examination for other artists. Anne Wallace's *Millennial Landscape: Reflecting Pool* is a plaster diorama of a sole, small figure pondering a pool of tar. Don Stewart's painting, *Transformation of Myth*, presents the individual surrounded by negative stereotypes of the black male: watermelons and 40-ounce beer bottles. Outside the ring is a purifying fire inscribed with aphorisms of personal actualization: "redefine self, my goal is beyond, fan the flames within." The subject of Katie Pell's whimsical *Kit* wears a headdress of millennial preparedness — flashlights, canteen, blankets, and a gas can. Divine hands from the clouds above reach down to crown the heap with a wine bottle. This mix of practicality and creative inspiration is reflected in the sparkling, "good-to-go" expression of the subject, an indication that personal readiness is a fine but negotiable balance.

Among these strong works, there is also a scattering of clocks and futuristic imagery. In large part, these easy gestures fail to engage beyond obvious associations to the passing of time. For most of us, the "great unknown" is the real bogeyman of Y2K, and the artist's truest source of creative motivation. Nothing new, it is the element of surprise in our lives and a constant companion of artists and non-artists alike. What's special about 2000? We all have the same date with it, and the clock's ticking. ■