

Swell Pell

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If Bruegel the Elder had painted Delaware Beach bums, they would probably look something like Katie Pell's motley crew at RC Gallery last week. Drinking, flirting, and fighting haven't changed much in five hundred years. As Pell's pastel-on-paper works confirm, a few things are especially timeless — the not so pretty lip, not so shapely thigh, and the less than heroic expression.

Depicting the human figure is an enduring artistic exercise. Like Bruegel, Pell has a particular gift for capturing the figure with all its rough edges intact. Exaggerating the familiar and grotesque, Pell's boardwalk layabouts are an assortment of aches, pains, and bony desires, with the fleshy parts hanging out the back end or over the belt.

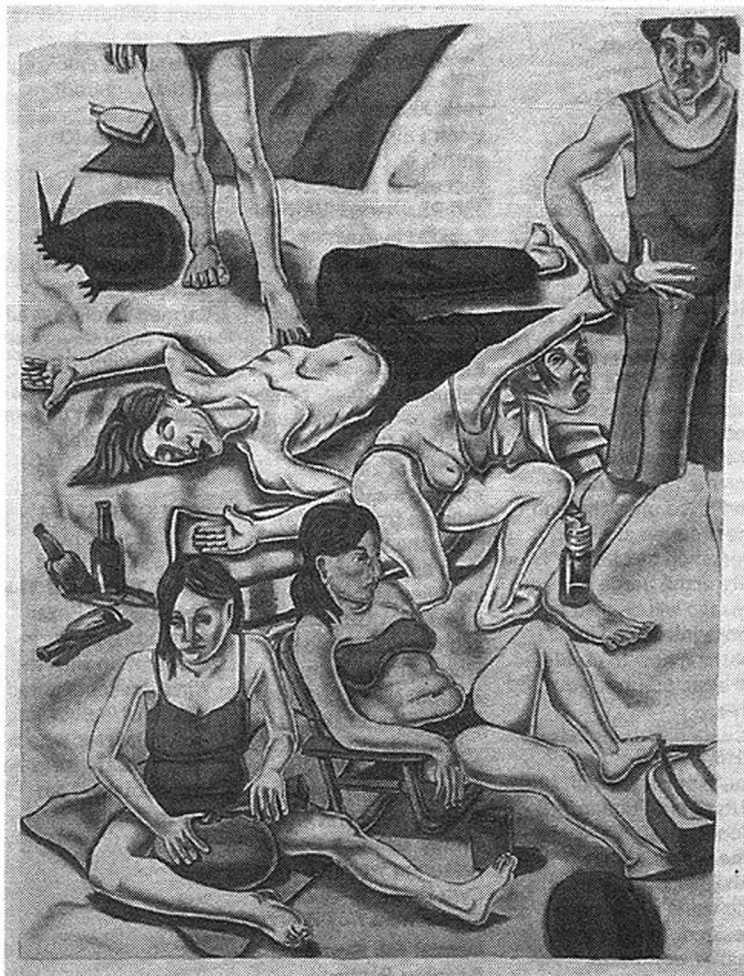
REVIEW

In five portraits and one large work entitled *Dewey Beach*, the show's goodtime vibe is carefully grounded by an almost classical seriousness. It is a world of rituals and poses condensed from the artist's childhood memories and fantasies. Bare skin is the color of alabaster and terra cotta, dramatically modeled with charcoal into sculptural, stone-like bodies. These chunky forms and dark-edged palette infuse the most reckless scene with a fierce grace.

In fact, these seaside denizens seem to harbor gluttony, envy, sloth, and a few other deadly sins. For the artist, locating beauty in ugliness is an ancient task, as old as art. Balancing the two, Pell is obviously reluctant to hoist judgments on her subjects. Her tolerance may be ambivalence in disguise, a result of humor, fascination, revulsion, and empathy in equal measure. But humanness is what slips past the censors. It's the thing that gets stuck in our teeth for all the world

to see. Pell's beach characters lack self-consciousness precisely because the artist knows them too well to pull her punches.

In Bruegel's Sixteenth century paintings *The Wedding Banquet* and *The Peasant Dance*, the Flemish master created richly detailed environments to envelope his subjects and themes. One wishes that Pell would similarly expand her view to include more of the surrounding context that informs her subjects. There we might find additional clues to invest in the astonishing faces, thus revealing even more of what makes them so irredeemably human. ●



Dewey Beach,
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