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FRIDAY

ART GALLERIES

ART SCENE

Artists' beliefs used to inspire not proselytize

Art collective not shy about faith

By Jenn Q. Goddu
Special to the Tribune

Members of the Chicago Artists' Collective are open about the fact that God inspires their new show, "Fish, Flesh, Fowl," which is on exhibit at the Chicago Arts District Warehouse through Aug. 7. Yet the paintings, sculpture, installation, drawing and mixed media art on display don't aim to proselytize.

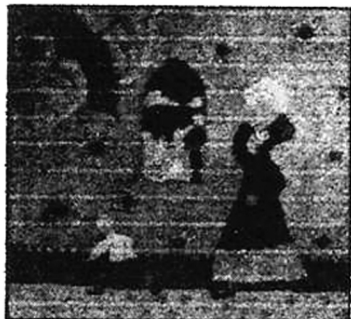
After all, the artists participating in the show have such a variety of beliefs about God, and responses to God's role in society today and throughout history, that there is no one theology for viewers to absorb.

"Diversity is what makes the show strong," said sculptor Kenneth Morrison. His work, for instance, examines the idea of God as a motivational force in society—a justification for good and ill acts.

Morrison refers to himself as "a recovering Catholic," but he's interested in the way people look to God for answers, and in how people react if they come to believe that there is no God to give those answers.

On the other hand, Zsafia Otvos' paintings come from an entirely different point of view. The paintings of women experiencing anxiety or suffering that she plans to put in the show are representations of "the thought that God is within us." For her it is simply a fact "that we all have our gods within ourselves, as part of our existence, an essential part. Just like you have your heart, you don't exist without it."

Then there are Ned Broderick's vibrant, large-form oil paintings of proud or pained

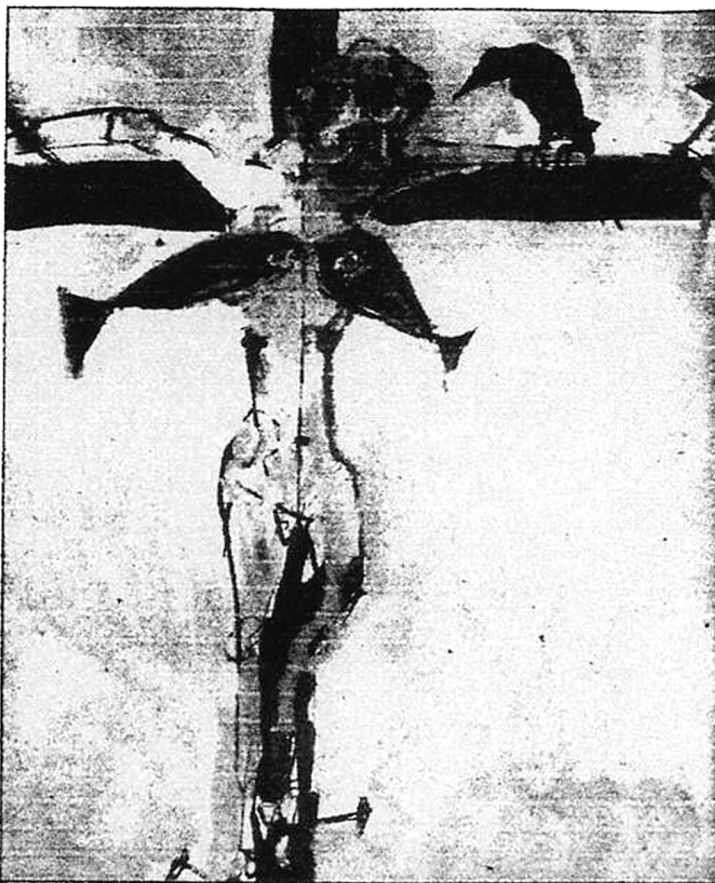


"3 Blind Leading Bewildered," a painting by David Simpson, is part of the show at the Chicago Arts District Warehouse.

male figures staring from the canvas. His work has long examined "people in trouble," so this is simply a natural extension of that interest, he said, adding "religion has got people in as much trouble as anything."

This range of viewpoints is what E.K. (Elizabeth) Buckley, who founded the collective (also known as Charcoll) in 2001 with Chris Johnson, expected when planning the show. "We have a group where just about everyone is going to have something that pushes you one way or another, whether you like it or not," Buckley said. The artists share a general aesthetic and know each other so well—many of them live and work near each other in Pilsen East—that the shows end up "really unified," she said. "The whole thing works together and you sense it."

Some of the works in the show freshly reinterpret familiar religious imagery. Both Otvos and Clara Batton Smith present their own imaginings of Michelangelo's *The Pieta*, which de-



"fish, flesh or fowl" is a work by E.K. Buckley, the founder of Charcoll, an artists' collective behind a show that looks at God and faith without preaching to showgoers.

Chicago Artists' Collective, 'Fish, Flesh, Fowl'

When: Through Aug 7
Where: Chicago Arts District Warehouse, 1826 S. Halsted St.
Price: Free; 312-243-4534

picts Mary holding Jesus after his death. Otvos' small painting is dark and harrowing while Smith's is a bright, cheery, almost comic book-style illustration of the Mary and Jesus pairing. Buckley—who is interested in now-overlooked female emanations of God—contributes an oil painting of the crucifixion giving Jesus' gaunt figure fish for breasts while a carrion crow rests on his shoulder.

There are also hints of the crucifix in Broderick's work, but he said, "you don't want to hit the viewer over the head with the image, you want to draw them into the image, and then they go 'whoa.'" Buckley added, "Yeah,

sometimes the hit over the head is 10 minutes later."

Painter Sally Hughes said reinterpreting the traditional images of God and religious figures didn't interest her. Instead she chose to investigate the components of God, how a God takes form. "It's a composite of very personal thoughts," she said of her work in progress, a mixed media painting examining the many facets of "what a god means as opposed to what it looks like."

And so God's form and religious iconography becomes only part of this show. "It would be silly for everyone to do a painting of the Madonna and Child, this has been done so much," Morrison said. "I think in this era, talking about what God means is much more interesting than just a picture of religious art."

As Otvos summed it up, "we just think of God in a much more individual way."