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Marriage, Home, and Family

UWM Union Art Gallery
2200 East Kenwood Boulevard, Milwaukee

Through December 15

The dual nature of the home, as a place of both comfort and conflict, is evident in the work on display in Marriage, Home, and Family at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Union Art Gallery. Overwhelmingly, the work references issues of inside versus outside, public versus private, and real versus idealized. The reality that contemporary western society is increasingly becoming a community of individuals lacking crucial emotional ties and authentic connection is quite overt. Much of the work reflects societal shifts, which have been increasingly more apparent in the past four decades, from the two-parent-two-children nuclear family to less traditional models. As demonstrated in recent politics, at both a national and local level, there exists a strong divide in relation to these issues.

The work is split between several large constructed environments, a series of paintings, and an immense quilt-like installation fashioned from numerous squares, contributed by artists, students, and children. David Najib Kasir's *American Family* series, comprised of six large house-shaped panels, makes for a startling entry into the gallery space. These surfaces, laden with thick paint, explore the presence of love and struggle within the home. His images consist of familiar themes; Echos depict a female and a male figure engaged in verbal conflict. The adult figures exist as faceless outlines of murky green and aqua, visually devoid of stability and presence. Two bold, bright red pairs of children's arms grasp at the figures in the midst of the struggle. Kasir's complementary color scheme heightens the anxiety and



David Najib Kasir, *American Family* detail.

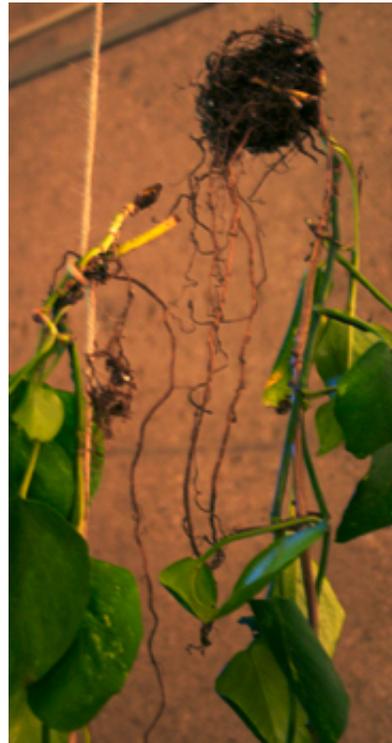
sense of unease experienced by the viewer. Bold line drawings of building materials, such as brick, stone, and siding, have been drawn directly on top of the figures which serves to further fracture the individuals, as well as the cohesiveness of the group.

Katherine Biehl's installation, *Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better*, is a rewriting of gender stereotypes. The space has been transformed into a kitchen reminiscent of the 1950s. The setting is one that evokes stereotypes of women's work. A sewing machine sits on top of a make shift table, fashioned from sawhorses. Beneath the sewing machine are Biehl's new icons of American domestic life. The faces of men and boys have been sewn onto women's bodies, and they are hard at work in the kitchen, or armed with an arsenal of cleaning products ready to polish furniture. Girls' faces beam as they don tool belts and wield hammers in workshops. Pages from home and fashion magazines, featuring women's faces pristinely made up, with hair coiffed and heavily sprayed, lay in a crumbled mass in the corner.



Katherine Biehl,
Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better, detail.

Nurture, a video installation by Naomi Shersty, alludes to issues of neglect. Plants ominously hang, after having been pulled from the roots, slowly shriveling in the gallery. They obstruct the entrance of the darkened space, discouraging the viewer from coming any further. Shersty's video consists of two semi-transparent layers of film footage. As a dark shadow of a woman begins to tread water, images of domestic spaces- which appear to be under water- fill the screen. A stock pot sinks into its depths, as well as other personal items. These items, cast off and seemingly forgotten, call into question the level of stability and safety that exist within this environment. At times it is unclear as to whether the woman in the water is swimming or drowning, as she seems to remain within a fixed location despite her physical efforts. The interiors of the spaces, which drift by the viewer, do not feel desirable or inviting. Evidence of entrapment, invisibility, and isolation urge the viewer to consider whether home is what helps or hinders personal growth and fulfillment.



Naomi Shersty, *Nurture*, detail.

Several of the individual quilt segments are equally provocative. Tricia Zigmund's *Just Catching Up?* recalls the familiar scenario in which a husband and a wife sit side by side on a couch, off in their own worlds. The man's head has been replaced by a lampshade, his wife is lost in her book; an obvious lack of engagement and connection exists between the two of them.

Rachel Quirk's photo series *Vows* documents two hands tying a knot. The photos have been printed a bit on the dark side. Some of the motions are blurred, which could easily allude to struggle. Does Quirk simply intend to make a visual pun, or is she referencing entanglement? Is the grid the photographs were laid out in suggestive of rigidity and monotony, or just coincidence?

Overall the installative work and Kasir's paintings are thought



Overall, the interactive work and each of paintings are thought provoking and prompt the viewer to question his or her notions of security, comfort, and control; as well as the significance they carry within the structure of the family. The cooperative installation in many ways lacks cohesion, as many of the individual units seem to serve a decorative, rather than communicative function. The decision to place two video installations, both containing sound, within inches of one another wasn't particularly well planned; as the tone in Shersty's and Carroll's work varies significantly, this serves to be a distraction as one views either work.

Tricia Zigmund, *Just Catching Up*

-Carrie Hoelzer

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