

A GRIM BUT TRANSFORMATIVE EXHIBIT

If you're ready to confront the transience of beauty and of life, 'Photography of the Figure' at Mercyhurst's Cummings Gallery has much to tell you.

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While existence is transient, we have always been somewhat reassured that a fleeting moment in time — including our own small part in the grand scheme of things — can be captured, through photography, for eternity.

"Photography of the Figure," on display at the Cummings Gallery at Mercyhurst College through Feb. 17, ruminates on that subject and the conclusions are sobering.

While maybe not the feel-good exhibit of the season, the nearly 40 pieces on display by four photographers merit a peek based on their quality, if not their cheerful buoyancy. The exhibit is co-curated by Gary Cardot of Mercyhurst College and Eric Grignol, director of Eric's Photomedia Center, an online photo gallery.

The artist who may most directly reference the themes of time and inevitability is Hiroshi Hayakawa of Columbus, Ohio. By applying a photographic emulsion to sheets of metal, he is able to print his photos of nude females on the oxidized surfaces. The juxtaposition is startling: The smooth skin of his models is mottled by spots of rust that become part of the image.

"The time represented by a photographic image, which belongs to the past, is physically shifted and relocated by the decay of the material, which is the manifestation of ongoing time," Hayakawa explains.

"The senses of permanence and timelessness conventionally associated with photographic prints are re-examined by the impermanence implied by the material."

In Hayakawa's world, perfection is as transitory as an instant captured in a photograph. The idealized forms — sometimes an entire figure, sometimes an indistinguishable part of one — are crack-



Louviere and Brown's 'Cobweb Sweeper'

led and rough texturally, in addition to the ever-present rust spots. The ephemeral nature of beauty has rarely been so simply and eloquently illustrated, and the tension created by the opposing forces is powerfully obvious.

The figures, Hayakawa says, "work as a catalyst to accelerate this transformation of the medium due to the transient nature of beauty with which female nudes are viewed."

Whether the artist's efforts contribute to a new paradigm for evaluating beauty, usefulness, and worth is another story.

LIKE HAYAKAWA, THE ARTISTIC team of Jeff Louviere and Vanessa Brown often uses nudity to strip

away all pretensions, all labels, all facades. Where the New Orleans-based pair differs is in their use of primarily male models, and even some animals, in their mythic, dreamlike visuals.

Atmospheric and enigmatic, their works range from single-panel, distressed-surface photographs to assemblages that can be almost kaleidoscopic in nature.

In their case, Louviere and Brown are not content to manipulate a captured moment in time. Instead, they create a subject that never was.

Many of the models photographed for the "Creature" series are adorned with peculiar appendages. In "The Son," a winged Icarus lays crumpled, bro-

ken in both body and spirit. We saw the ethereal "Cobweb Sweeper" at last year's Photomedia Center Open Exhibition at the Urraro Gallery, but its gauzy ambiguity and disquieting visual impenetrability never get old.

Javier Lopez-Rotella has used both men and women in his photographic "Series Acotados," or "Enclosed Beings" series. The series examines those people who live on, as he explains, "the limits of uncertainty, defined by the social order and the assumptions that are the foundation of this order."

A native of Argentina now living in Astoria, N.Y., Lopez-Rotella isn't necessarily taking on the restrictions of time, but of our real or perceived identities.

The folks in his photos are usually nude, often bald — both the men and the women — and inevitably engaged in a furtive, almost desperate quest for some type of connection, be it with one another, their surroundings, or themselves.

These are perhaps the most desperate, the most apprehensive of all the photographs in the exhibit. What they capture are not moments that might be or moments that could have been, but moments of palpable and profound unease that is more familiar to many of us than we'd like it to be.

Lopez-Rotella has said that his beings implore us not to merely survive, but to "begin life, leaving behind the fear that paralyzes us."

It's not what we want to hear, but we have more in common with these people than any of us would like to admit. This is one of those times when it takes a strong constitution to face what this exhibit is trying to tell us.

If you're ready to confront the transience of beauty and of life, and the myriad of immobilizing forces that encumber each one of us, then you'll find it to be a transformative encounter.

'Photography of the Figure'

is on view through Feb. 17 at the Cummings Gallery at Mercyhurst College's Mary D'Angelo Center. Gallery hours are Tue-Sun from 2-5 p.m., Thu from 7-9 p.m. Selected works from the exhibit are also on display online at www.photomediacenter.org.