Artists Define Their Femininity In Bruce, Wadsworth Exhibits

A commentary on the strength and resilience of women is powerfully depicted in Janet Biggs' video "Vanishing Point."

By Susan Dunne

Pablo Picasso frequently visited the themes of mother and children, creating images of serene beauties clutching calm or playful children.

British artist Jenny Saville had a unique response to that. Saville once famously commented that Picasso "didn't know what [maternity] felt like." So she painted a self-portrait with her two children. She depicts herself nude, exhausted, her hair pulled back in an messy bun, barely holding on to two screaming, squirming naked toddlers. "She has a first-hand knowledge of femininity," said Mia Laufer, curator of the Bruce Museum's new exhibit "Her Crowd."

The show features 21st-century artworks by women borrowed from collectors in the art-rich homes of Fairfield and Westchester (N.Y.) counties. The women use their artworks to reclaim their voices, to say for themselves what male artists have been saying for centuries about women and women's issues.
Lalla Essaydi is based in New York, but she's from Morocco, and her artwork meditates of what it's like to be a woman, a Moroccan, a Muslim. In her photo "Women of Morocco #16," a woman lies on her back, her head on a pillow, against a white background. Her clothes, the pillows, the walls and her body are covered with Arabic text. "She gives a figurative voice to herself and her subjects," Laufer said.

Betye Saar's "The Weight of Color" is a mixed-media assemblage made up of a Mammy-like African-American figurine on top of a caged blackbird padlocked onto a rusty scale, to suggest the heavy burden of racist stereotypes. Two gentle porcelain figurines of contemplative girls by Kiki Smith, seen alongside a eerie figure of a girl with an owl head by Klara Kristalova, show two sides of girls' dream lives, one sweet and the other more disturbing.

Several artists take on the ever-present, unrealistic influence of fashion-doll imagery. E.V. Day's "Satellite of Modern Love" has blue-painted Barbie-like legs exploding from a jumbled mass. Wangechi Mutu's piece from her "Tumors" series show similar legs exploding from a mass of uterine fibroids, commenting that standards of beauty often draw attention away from urgent, real-life concerns. Marilyn Minter's "Puddle" photographs a spiked heel covered with rhinestones, being soiled by a grimy splotch of water.
LGBT issues are cleverly presented by Malia Jensen's bronze statue "Young Bucks" and Hilary Harkness' oil on panel "Blue Nude." Jensen created two male deer having sex, to challenge the belief that homosexuality is not a natural thing. Harkness' work shows two beautiful women in bed being served breakfast by their female hostess, none other than Gertrude Stein, in a boudoir dominated by paintings of nude women by Matisse and Gauguin. A man's severed head sits on the bureau underneath the Gauguin.

A commentary on the strength and resilience of women is powerfully depicted in Janet Biggs' video "Vanishing Point. The film features footage of motorcycle racer Leslie Porterfield, who is recovering from a grave injury, zooming along on the Bonneville Salt Flats. Intercut with the Porterfield images are images of the female-dominated choir from the Addicts Rehabilitation Center Gospel Church of Harlem. Both show women coming back from personal adversity, stronger than they were before, and moving forward into the future.

'She'

A small exhibit at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford also focuses on strong women. "She" features 12 pieces by both male and female artists offering differing interpretations of female strength. With her wall sculpture "Goodbye Goddess," Norma Minkowitz created four figures of Venus, each slightly different as the goddess ages, with a fifth figure, a face in a moon, hovering overhead.

Elizabeth Catlett's yellow onyx sculpture "Seated Woman" is an interpretation of a powerful African-American woman. Lorraine O'Grady's "Sisters I-IV," is four sets of side-by-side portraits that show the physical similarities between ancient African queens and contemporary African-American women.

Mario Carreño's "Venus and the Fisherman" takes up where Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" leaves off. Carreño's goddess has been fully born and rests in the sand, a beautiful naked Hispanic woman, while two fisherman ignore her and keep on working.