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## Review: Karen Ehlers, Bonnie Meltzer and others

By D.K. Row, The Oregonian  
June 16, 2009, 10:59AM

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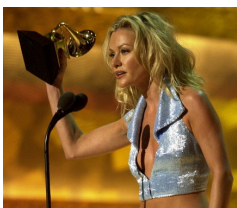
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"We Are All Vain" by Karen Ehlers

Between 1980 and 1983 a young photographer named Matt Sweeney took a lot of pictures in West Hollywood and environs, creating a bright-and-gritty composite portrait of the town's spangly street life.

In the past few months Sweeney's friend, artist Karen Ehlers, has revisited his photographic Tinseltown and reimagined it in a series of bright, big oil paintings that drop out some of the grit and amp up the attitude into a kind of winking, dryly funny human comedy. The results of her act of imagination are on view this month at **Blackfish Gallery**.

I like the bold humor, the brightness, the melting-flesh humanity on this boulevard of fleshpot dreams. These are real people, when you get down to it, whatever image they throw out: hot pants, scoop necks, bell bottoms, little-girl frocks. We see pickpockets, street hawkers selling fingerprints to tourists, crowds outside Grauman's Chinese Theater. Military men (including General Hershey Bar), suits in shades, geezers in white shoes, plump guys twirling Japanese umbrellas. White-haired ladies in gold-loop earrings and ruby-red lipstick. As one title says, "We are all a little bit vain."

This is verite, but with a twinkling eye. Ehler's paintings have a sketchy,

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By John Foyston

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provisional feel, the sense of moments quickly captured, which makes sense given their photographic underpinnings. They may be modest in their technical ambitions, but at their best they exude the sort of embracing acceptance of human frailty that you get from a Cartier-Bresson photo --and they're warmer, interestingly, than Sweeney's sober-eyed street portraits on which they're based. Just right for the month when the sun comes out.

*Blackfish Gallery, 420 N.W. Ninth Ave.; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays; closes June 27; 503-224-2634 or www.blackfish.com; free*

**Bonnie Meltzer at Beet Gallery:** The tale of women's bodies has been dripped out in the paint of men. Just pull out your art history book and flip it open to almost any page: bare flesh, open invitations, a fever of familiar dreams.

So maybe women look at it a little differently. Certainly Bonnie Meltzer does, at least in "The Clothing Chronicles," her small selection of sculptural mixed-media assemblages at **Beet Gallery**, which creates a sense of the female body by not portraying it at all.

What we get instead is bodily accoutrements, a gathering of the everyday that suggests the body is important --vital, really, and intensely interesting --but must be accepted in conjunction with the realities that cover and shape and hide it amid the minutiae that make up life.

So Meltzer builds a striped apron with pockets and a pencil and a "Junior Hospital Volunteer" badge. And a pair of crumpled ballet slippers, and black stockings tumbling to their toes like the deflating extremities of a blowup doll that's sprung a leak. And "20th Century Cups," a busty bra made of wire and old red telephone cord that looks as if Wonder Woman might slip into it at any moment. Most interesting, maybe, is "Slip," a diaphanous, well-shaped example of that undergarment, which is written on and says in part: "I still wear a slip. Who wears a slip anymore? Not many. One has to wear a shirt or a dress --but who does that anymore either? . . . the silky fabric against skin and a connection with the past."

Again, there's nothing demanding technically about this work: It can seem too easy, too naive. But I like its heart, and its smart sense of the way of all flesh. Listen up, guys. You can learn from this.

*Beet Gallery, 1720 N.W. Lovejoy St., No. 120; 11 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays; closes June 27; 503-224-5000 or www.beetgallery.com; free*

**Lee Kelly and Gustavo Ramos Rivera at Elizabeth Leach Gallery:** In the lofty environs of the Leach gallery, a couple of grand old men have some bold new pieces on display.

Lee Kelly, born in 1932, has been creating his signature abstract sculptures for many years: You can usually tell a Kelly at first glance. What keeps him, and them, interesting is not just the variations within the theme of his forms but also the way he plays around with the sculptures' surfaces.

His freshest work here is inspired by a visit to Khajuraho, a town of about 20,000 in north-central India that is fabled for its medieval Hindu and Jain temples, many of which include erotic carvings on their outside, so they won't defile the gods on the inside.

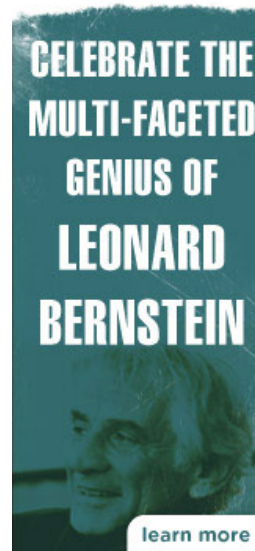
His surfaces on these new pieces are worked to a kind of rough angel-glow, with gold leaf so they take on that aluminum-foil shine on the wings of devotional Christmas cards.

There's a purity in their reflected light but also a roughness to the texture, as if something human and still striving is going on.

Longtime San Francisco artist Gustavo Ramos Rivera was born and raised in Mexico, where the sun shines hot and hard. Born in 1940, he retains an astonishingly youthful exuberance in his paintings, but an exuberance that has learned the lessons of technique.

"Invenciones de Sol," his show of big, bright oils at Elizabeth Leach, consists of rough-hewn slabs of brilliant color --reds, blues, blacks, grays, greens that bump rumble-tumble against each other. Like Kelly's sculptures they have a finished-but-unfinished look, the sense that something was stopped abruptly

## BERNSTEIN



so the energy couldn't flicker out.

Dare you to yawn and walk away.

*Elizabeth Leach Gallery, 417 N.W. Ninth Ave.; 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays; closes June 27. 503-224-0521 or www.elizabethleach.com; free*

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