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'UTOPIANS' EXHIBITION AN ENGAGING REVISION OF HISTORY

By Amy Griffin



Sarah Peters' *Satyr with Tree Stump*, 2012, bronze 1/10, 12 x 4 x 4 inches (Courtesy John Davis Gallery)

There's an element of pastiche — in a good way — to the drawings and sculptures of Sarah Peters.

Her work, on view for another week at the John Davis Gallery in Hudson, could almost be of another time, both in technique and subject matter. The artist knowingly references, among other things, classical sculpture, 19th- and 20th-century art, American history and mythology to create a body of work that works as a narrative of an imagined past.

Her drawings, particularly, bring to mind Honore Daumier, the great 19th-century French artist known especially for his biting caricatures of figures from Parisian politics and society. Daumier's lithographs in the journal *La Caricature* so incensed King Louis-Philippe I that he sentenced the artist to prison for six months. In one caricature, the king is presented in four small portraits, each one progressively resembling a pear until the final one is simply a pear.

The distortion of the king's head and jowls is similar to what Peters does with some of her subjects, though she seems to have more affection for them than Daumier did for his.

Perhaps what pushes these portraits beyond caricature is that they previously existed only in her imagination. In her statement, Peters says the portraits depict "American idealists, zealots, and visionaries" and the titles don't give any more information — they're just titled "Portrait" and numbered. It's up to us to fill in the narrative of these characters, all of whom look either beleaguered or insane but somehow, strangely enough, familiar.

Although she says they span history from early Colonial days to the 20th century, something about them all seemed very 19th century. The title of the show is "Utopians," and her characters are rendered in Dickensian extremes.

There are three portraits upstairs and a roomful downstairs. Each is filled with aggressive marks in pen, ink and pencil that carve deep trenches in the paper, giving some the quality of a relief drawing. Her pen revisits the same spots over and over to achieve the blackest black in parts — the lips or eyes, for instance.

The portraits downstairs are smaller and older, with three larger drawings upstairs. The newer pieces appear to reflect a turn in the drawings; each has a huge head of oddly shaped hair. With "Woman with Black Hair" (2012), Peters has left the left eye blurry, unfinished, almost erased, while the right eye is almost equally obscured by repeated black marks. The hair is a mass of cross-hatching and swirls, obsessively drawn, as always.

The centerpiece of the main floor of this small-but-inviting space is a plywood table full of bronze sculptures. In some, the similarities to her drawing are evident — "Head of a Bearded Man" (2012), is an impressive bust whose beard reflects the same kind of obsessive mark-making as the portraits. It's, in effect, a three-dimensional version of one of the drawings with one unsettling feature — the eyes. It's hard to tell if these big, round, smoothed-over orbs are closed or wide open.

The rest of the sculptures are more delicate figures. "Satyr with Tree Stump" (2012), has detail in some places, while other places are left unformed — hairy cloven-footed legs give way to an unfinished torso, a glob of bronze where the head and arms should be. Other figures seem to rise out of a primordial ooze, as if they've been frozen in the process of formation. The legs of "Kneeling Woman" (2012), are cobbled together, only separating at the knees, but the rest of it could almost be an unfinished nude by early 20th-century sculptor Aristide Maillol.

Except for the bust, these figures don't have features you can make out; many don't even have heads. There are pleasures to be had in these little sculptures, but they have less emotional impact than the portraits.

Peters writes in her statement that her sculptures "begin with fervent emulation of Western figurative sculpture, and end with the pleasure of contemporary misinterpretation." It's a nice description of the work, and something similar could be said about the drawings. Using techniques favored in the past to create new historical figures, Peters presents an engaging body of work that both reflects on and rewrites history.