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ART REVIEW

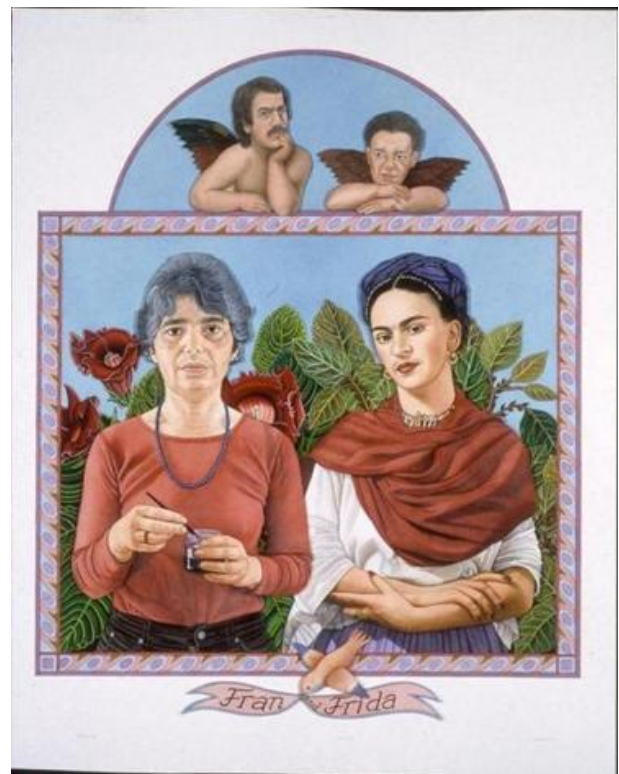
‘Jane Lund: Home Body’ at Danforth Museum

BY SEBASTIAN SMEE
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FRAMINGHAM — Every now and then you see work so odd, so arresting, so simultaneously awful and wonderful, that you feel your critical criteria, like the skin of a relocated chameleon, changing color in its presence.

Jane Lund’s “Home Body” is a series of small, brightly colored and fiendishly detailed works hanging in a chapel-like gallery at the Danforth Museum of Art through Dec. 16. When I first saw these watercolor constructions, they brought on precisely this reptilian reaction in me. By the time I saw them again, a few days later, my eyes finally allowed themselves an occasional blink, and I no longer needed winning over.

Lund, who lives in Ashfield, was born in Queens, N.Y., in 1939, and moved to the Boston area in the 1960s. Working in a Pioneer Valley artists’ milieu associated with figurative and magic realist art, she carved out a strong reputation for her intimate and virtuosic pastels — mostly still lifes, interiors, and portraits — in the 1980s.



Jan Lund’s painting of artist Gregory Gillespie’s wife, Fran, alongside the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo with a mustachioed Gillespie and Kahlo’s lover, Diego Rivera, both posing as the angels from Raphael’s “Sistine Madonna and her Angels.”

Where those works were ostensibly calm, the works in “Home Body” are hectic. Where they were cool, these are crazed and cackling. They combine the look of highly detailed children’s pop-up book illustrations with the small scale and vivid coloring of Indian miniatures, along with a dash of mad

patterning and a dollop of postmodern appropriation, to create a kind of hallucinatory dream journal in pictures.

A disconcerting dream journal at times. In the work “Home Body,” from which the show takes its title, Lund shows herself as a four-armed, ghoulishly masked Mesoamerican deity. Her hands hold puppet strings. A smiling toddler stands in a crib. A skeleton stands in a closet. A human heart rests on a platter on a side table, beneath which languishes a severed head.

The whole hyperventilating picture is tiny, just a few inches square. In spirit, it’s reminiscent of Mexican ex-voto paintings, like the Peres Maldonado ex-voto at Wellesley College’s Davis Museum, which shows a woman undergoing breast cancer surgery in the 18th century. But in its bright crisp detail and its embrace of everyday realities (the crib! the children’s toys!) the picture feels adamantly up-to-the-minute.

Among the other pictures are several tributes to Lund’s friend and fellow artist Gregory Gillespie, who died, at age 63, in 2000. One is a kind of altarpiece replete with a double portrait of Gillespie as naked older man and clothed young man, with a mysterious combination of last supper and rural scene beneath. This and the nearby “Two-Headed Woman Meets Famous Artist” come replete with various checkered patterns — not to mention tiger stripes and busy brick work.

A painting-within-the-painting reproduces a well-known self-portrait by Gillespie. The bare-chested artist’s hand, holding a brush, extends out of the frame in the direction of the Lund figure, who wears a bikini, boots, and a cape, and wields a machete.

Severed heads and limbs elsewhere in the show remind us what can be accomplished by machetes, but it’s never easy to extract meanings from these associations. You are left simply rubbing your eyes, scratching your head.

Another work shows Gillespie’s wife, Fran, alongside the Mexican painter she revered, Frida Kahlo. Framed above them are a mustachioed Gillespie and Kahlo’s lover, Diego Rivera, both posing as the angels from Raphael’s “Sistine Madonna and her Angels.” Bizarre. Brilliant.

“The Garden,” meanwhile, one of my favorites, shows a topless woman in a grass skirt standing in a hillside garden, with brightly colored eggplants, pumpkins, peppers, tomatoes, and carrots radiating out in serried ranks from her upraised arms. A framed mandala sits off to the side in the sky.

The whole thing is as magnificent as it is unlikely.

Yes, Lund’s idiom reminds you of various other pictorial tropes, from children’s illustration to Mexican religious art to modern figurative realism. But her virtuosic mash-ups are executed with such febrile intensity, such eccentric panache, that you can’t help but fall under their spell.