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by Leah Ollman

She's probably hiding something

Susan Hauptman rarely cracks a smile in the self-portrait drawings she's been making for two decades. She wears a no-nonsense hairstyle — a buzz cut, more or less — and she stares straight out at us from under heavy eyelids that seem to dime her real interest in what's beyond.

Nevertheless, she's something of a trickster. The New York-based artist's recent charcoal and pastel drawings at Forum Gallery show her cracking subtle visual jokes and tweaking expectation, all the while maintaining an expression flat as a mugshot.

Illusion is her primary vehicle and plaything. She manipulates it with extraordinary dexterity, intensifying it and subverting it with equal panache. In the large-scale self-portraits, she draws herself with near-photographic exactitude. The black netting of a hat she wears in one of the images looks so three-dimensional



Forum Gallery

SELF-PORTRAIT: Susan Hauptman's expression doesn't change, but her foils do.

crinkling over her forehead that even peering at the drawing close-up and from an angle doesn't dispel the magic.

In most of the images, Hauptman plants a foil of some sort, with inconsistent success. A colored beach ball appears in a few of the otherwise black-and-white drawings, incongruously buoyant and bright. The selective injection of color gives the drawings a curious awkwardness, like

an old movie that's been colorized.

Visual puns come off better, especially in an image in which a boyish Hauptman sits at a table, the two thick stems in a vase before her reading as suspenders crossing her white shirt. She also plays deftly with forms shifting out of palpability, dissolving into charcoal gray fog. In a group of still lifes, some forms obey gravity and others defy it.

There is always something in Hauptman's drawings that catches you off-guard — the quirky thrift-shop ensembles she wears, the juxtaposition of her mannish face and hair with outfits of ruffles and lace, the squirrel resting on her palm. Hauptman jump-starts each narrative with the power of illusion and then devilishly throws it off-course.

Forum Gallery, 8069 Beverly Blvd. (323) 655-1550, through Nov. 13. Closed Sunday and Monday.

ADAA member

730 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10019
Tel: (212) 355-4545 Fax: (212) 355-4547