

HOME & GARDEN

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The Ferrin Gallery of Lenox, Mass., will be bringing Sergei Isupov's porcelain "Group of Heads" to SOFA CHICAGO 2006.



HEADS UP - IT'S SOFA SEASON

Human forms that rely not on flesh and blood to thrive but, rather, glass and clay, wood and embroidery are the stars of SOFA CHICAGO 2006 at Navy Pier. Why the huge figural presence? Says Sergei Isupov, creator of the "Group of Heads" at left: "You go straight to the emotional level in figurative [forms], and you immediately strike some kind of relationship with people." PAGE 9

SOFA CHICAGO 2006

Art show a study in

By Mary Daniels

Tribune staff reporter

Art never occurs in a vacuum. The pressures of the world we live in bring it out of artists like a giant fist squeezing the cornucopia of creativity. And that is what seems to be happening with one of the most visually stunning art shows that comes to Chicago every fall and opens this weekend, SOFA CHICAGO 2006.

As visitors to the 13th annual International Exposition of Sculpture Objects and Functional Art at Navy Pier will certainly see, this year there is a striking prominence of figurative art.

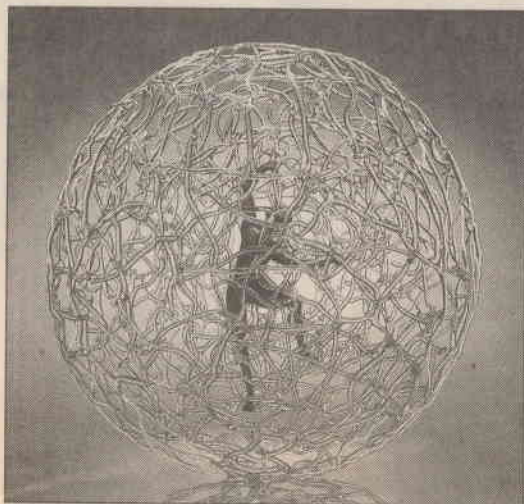
You've got human figures worked in blown, cast, lost wax and other forms of glass; in ceramics from pure white porcelain to russet terra-cotta clay; you've got owl-and-pussycat marriages such as a figure in blown glass encased in bronze framework and another in a combo of alabaster, wood and metal. You even have a portrait series of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo done in embroidery thread with a punch needle.

One can't help but wonder, what is going on here?

SOFA artist Sergei Isupov (represented by Ferrin Gallery in Lenox, Mass.) brings his "Group of Heads," five sloe-eyed busts in hand-built porcelain, with human legs emerging from their skulls a la demon horns, explains: "Figures were not popular 10 years ago," when he first exhibited at SOFA, Isupov says, "because it was considered a craft show." But now, artists are trying to find new mediums of expression and new materials. "You go straight to the emotional level in figurative [forms], and you immediately strike some kind of relationship with people."

Caged up

Mauro Bonaventura, an exciting young Venetian glass artist relatively new to SOFA, is sending work using the human form that is at once exquisitely beautiful and disturbing. In his



Venetian glass artist Mauro Bonaventura's "White Sphere" contains a figure in a network of glass.



Rosita Johanson's "Frida" is an homage to the life and work of Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, with whom Johanson empathizes.

piece "White Sphere," a small blood-red figure struggles to climb upward inside a cage of tangled glass.

Bonaventura "prefers to use faceless figures as a symbol of the neutrality of humanity," says Sami Harawi, owner of Mostly Glass Gallery in Englewood, N.J., which represents him.

"Humanity is in a cage," Bonaventura says in a telephone interview. "The technological world we live in sometimes suffocates us. We feel limited as if we were prisoners in a cage. We struggle, longing for freedom, quietness and silence."

He comes to the use of the figurative outside of any trend. "I love the human figure," he says, having studied it for four years at the Liceo in Venice. He also loves red, he says "because it is strong."

Through The Gallery, Ruthin Craft Centre, in Wales, Claire Curnenen of Cardiff, Wales, has sent to SOFA "Feast," a hand-built, high-fired white porcelain torso covered in hand-built roses. It is a piece that evokes the portraits of Renaissance saints, which fascinate her. "I'm quite sure that fine craft artists are using the human figure more," she says. Not only female artists like herself, "but male artists are engaging in it more."

"The human form is a very compelling image. The world of fine art — painting and sculpture — has moved away from that. But the world that has a grounding in craft is holding onto it."

Her "Feast" "plays on melancholy and on ecstasy; that is what I look toward. I think a lot of artists have looked at images of suffering to be inspired," she says.

Debra Fritts of Atlanta, represented by Gallery 500 of Philadelphia, brings to SOFA "Silent Language," a hand-built terra-cotta clay sculpture of a female form. "It is natural for me to use the female form in my work," she says. Her images are "part of what I've experienced in my life," and not consciously part of a trend. "I'm just interested in the figure."

body language



Debra Fritts' "Silent Language," in terra cotta clay, is a kind of self-portrait.

But she adds, "that more fine craft artists share that interest, is extremely exciting. . . . Maybe there is a real need to use the human figure, with what is going on in our society. With all the trauma in the world, maybe we need something to ground us." Though her "Silent Language" figure is positive, "there's a melancholy there," she admits.

Subliminal messages

The work of Montreal artist Carole Pilon, shown at SOFA by Galerie Elena Lee of Montreal, is one of the most evocative images at the show. A headless, armless clear crystal human torso sits atop a tall white shaft, with dangling "legs," that have turned into gnarly green vegetal roots, as if this were some sort of human/plant mutant.

Pilon says her work "is about transformation of the body. . . . I try to draw a parallel to how things happen to those bodies and we have no control over that, like a genetic accident or tree roots that encircle a rock."

The title of her piece, "Les Corps Etranges 6," created out of crystal and paper pulp, "means something that doesn't belong to your body. It is a typical expression in French a doctor might use to tell you, 'You have a rock in your stom-

SOFA Chicago 2006

What: The 13th annual International Exposition of Sculpture Objects & Functional Art brings 100 international galleries and dealers to Navy Pier to exhibit one-of-a-kind three-dimensional works bridging contemporary decorative and fine art. All artwork is for sale.

Where: Navy Pier Festival Hall, 600 E. Grand Ave.

When: 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, noon to 6 p.m. Nov. 12.

Admission: \$15 at door, \$25 for three-day pass; student, senior and group (10 or more people) tickets, \$12 each.

Opening night preview: 7 to 10 p.m. Thursday in Festival Hall; \$50, available in advance or at the door.

Lecture series: The 31-lecture series will be held Friday and Saturday, and are free to SOFA attendees. Speakers include artists, collectors and arts professionals; for more information, see www.sofaexpo.com.

For tickets and more information: Visit www.sofaexpo.com or e-mail info@sofaexpo.com or call 800-563-7632.

ach," she says. "The things we go through leave a mark or distortion on the body. I think maybe unconsciously we are affected by these genetic transformations, even if we don't agree with what scientists say about it."

One can hear the subliminal messages of these artists coming through.

"Traditionally, the human form has been looked at as the highest form of sculpture," says SOFA director Mark Lyman. "I think the world in the last five years has gotten into a higher stress situation, with the war and 9/11 and sculptors are using these forms to express their anxiety in human form."

mdaniels@tribune.com

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