

Arts & Entertainment



PATRICIA WRIGHT/Special to the Gazette

Northampton artist Harriet Diamond is shown with some of her work, which has been referred to as a sculptural "photo album" or "family diary."

Artistic fondness for everyday life

By PATRICIA WRIGHT
Special to the Gazette

Every time I start writing about Northampton sculptor Harriet Diamond, I start rhapsodizing about dogs.

A poet of pooches, I call her. A wizard of hounds. Give Diamond a loose-limbed, floppy-eared dog and a couple of yards of chicken wire, and she'll get him right down to the last nip, yawn, stretch, and whine.

I don't know why I focus on The Dog, in particular, in the art of Harriet Diamond. Someone else might focus on The Kid. Or The Grandmother. Or The Mom, The Dad, or The Comfortable Domestic Rubble.

What all of it exemplifies is a penchant for the lovable everyday. Diamond, who's 38 and the mother of two high-speed school-age boys, has been working for several years now on a sort of sculptural "photo album" or "family diary."

It wasn't easy for Diamond to — as we say in the Valley — "give herself permission" to explore such downhome imagery. Like most artists of her generation, her education was overseen by teachers weaned on abstract expressionism.

"And I can't imagine any more doctrinaire group," she says sadly, "than old, male abstract expressionists."

In the orthodoxy of abstract expressionists, observes Diamond, all figurative images are suspect, and images of kids, dogs, and grannies are "the kiss of death." Such images are the stuff of greeting cards. The stuff of art is Big Issues — Life with a capital "L."

Diamond thinks life with a capital "L" is what we're already living. "I look around me and I say — 'Why can't this be it?'" she says.

"I mean, most of life is not the Big Celebrated Moments! Most of it's more like walking the dog or trudging down the street to the

Art Views

Taste Freeze."

The sculpture resulting from this philosophy is uniquely honest and affable. Sometimes modeled in clay at the "sketch" stage, generally executed full scale in unpretentious papier-mache, Diamond's figures are affectionate without flattery, humorous without caricature.

The quickness and specificity of the small figures in clay remind me very much of small figures by Daumier — if you can imagine Daumier sans misogyny, and in fact pretty much sans politics altogether.

What I particularly wanted to ask Harriet Diamond is what that quickness and specificity is based upon. Studio models? Photographs? Taxidermy?

None of the above. Diamond's tool of choice is memory.

"A photograph always puts you

back one generation from the thing itself," says Diamond. "You start looking at the outlines rather than at where things really are, at the muscles and bones."

What works best for her, Diamond says, is to look for things that interest her and then go to the studio and start drawing.

"The way you capture gesture is to try to think what it feels like," she says.

"If you think dog," she adds, hitching back her elbow and cocking her wrist as if to scratch herself, hound-like, in the ribs, "it's probably going to work."

The amusing quality of much of Diamond's sculpture — particularly in a domestic ensemble like "Big Wheels," with its rocketing tots and trademark pooch — isn't exactly inadvertent, but it's not consciously imposed either. "When something is funny," Diamond says, "it's never because I've set out to make it that way."

That infectious good humor seems to radiate from the very

substance of the figures. Figures that are lively alone are all the more so in ensemble, linked as they are by a wonderfully animated sense of line and fluent elaboration of their surfaces with paint.

People like this work, and Diamond is pleased that they do. But while she acknowledges, "you can't fail to recognize at some point what you're doing, and to capitalize on it," the impetus for further work isn't the work she's already done. It's the life she's lived and is living: kids, dogs, domestic rubble and all.

"I'm not against taking certain liberties," says Diamond. "But basically I think this is it: This is the real thing. The mystical plane is at the same level with what we see every day."

"It's all here now, and if you miss that, you miss the whole thing."

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