

Visual Arts: Disturbing images are anything but 'Minor'

By Mike Giuliano

Intolerance has taken many forms through the ages, but its ugliness remains the same. That's the basic idea behind the otherwise thematically sprawling exhibit "**The Narcissism of Minor Differences**" at the Maryland Institute College of Art.

The show's title comes from a Sigmund Freud quotation about the small differences between people that can make them mistrust and then dislike each other. Although it's to the show's credit that it cites so many specific historic examples, the show tends to feel as arbitrary as it is didactic.

There is not much focus as the exhibit jumps from one example to another. Fortunately, there are enough thought-provoking examples along the meandering way.

One point immediately made at the entrance to the exhibit is the extent to which intolerance and its consequences have resulted in equally dire consequences in every era. A circa 1810 print from Spanish artist Francisco de Goya's "The Disasters of War" series depicts soldiers treating women as spoils of war.

Hanging next to Goya's bracing print is the late American artist Leon Golub's ink and acrylic painting "This Could Be You #11" (2001), in which a female prisoner is tied to a chair. Standing before her is an aggressive-looking man who holds a torture-suitable club in one hand; his other hand is clenched in a fist. Throughout his career, Golub made images of conflict that avoid specific topical references in order to evoke contemplation about the nature of human aggression.

The exhibit generally suffers from a this-and-that quality, but does follow through on Golub's reminder that this could be you. If you try to look at some of the showcased historic examples of intolerance with a degree of detachment, something will jostle you into realizing that the past casts a long shadow.

This idea comes across in works including three untitled charcoal drawings from a series of "KKK Portraits" done by the late Philip Guston in 1968. These sketchy depictions of hooded figures do not directly depict things like lynching, but the schematically rendered figures have an ominous aura.

Although Guston was far removed from such Klansmen both geographically and ideologically, the cigar-smoking artist allows for some degree of identification by having one of the Klansmen smoke a cigar. Guston seems to be saying that these grotesquely cartoonish images of evil may tie into our own lives and sensibilities in disturbing ways.

If Guston's sparsely rendered Klansmen seem like unfriendly ghosts, a related sort of ghostly presence can be sensed in Maryland artist Karina Skvirsky's four contemporary color photographs showing the present appearance of the sites of lynchings in Annapolis, Salisbury and elsewhere around the state in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

A close-up shot of a tree obviously prompts one to think about what happened there, but other shots simply show rural landscapes. There are no historical markers commemorating what took place there, so most of us would travel through such landscapes without realizing the specific historical events that happened in these exact locations.

This exhibit is at its best when it prompts you to make connections between then and now. Another fine example is a 1993 photographic installation by Jonathan Borofsky titled "Both the Fascist and the Idealist Search for Perfection." Borofsky juxtaposes photos from his own family photo album with archival photos of Hitler.

Seeing a photo of Borofsky as a child posing with his dog installed next to a photo of Hitler posing with his dog makes for an uncomfortable pairing. Hitler was evil and Borofsky is not evil, of course, and yet their shared humanity includes many of the same mundane aspects of domestic life.

It's easy to observe that Hitler was a failed artist who ultimately became a failed dictator, whereas Borofsky is a successful artist in the position to pass ethical judgment on Hitler. It's a less comfortable thought, however, to realize that the potential for evil is not easily explained or contained.