

## Arts & Reviews

# The art of attraction

Images explore  
desire, politics,  
and advertising

By Cate McQuaid  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

The centerpiece of painter Sam Messer's show at Nielsen Gallery is a bronze sculpture of a figure with the shoulders, head, and arms of a gorilla and the torso and legs of a man. The half-man, half-beast theme is nothing new, but there's something compelling and original about this version. Messer doesn't strike the trite and typical balance of a man wrestling with his baser instincts. Neither man nor animal is baser in this piece, called "The Evolution of Desire."

The artist draws a more nuanced dichotomy. The figure kneels and gazes upward, hands raised almost prayerfully over his head. His skin appears to be falling off his arms in places; his eyes and nostrils are great blank sockets. He looks mournful. At the same time, he has an erection, denoting power and desire. Messer suggests that the beast may be noble and the man wild, or even that such a distinction is meaningless.



Above: A photograph from Fotini Christia's "Walls of Martyrdom," her exhibit of murals from Tehran. Below: Penelope Umbrico's "Book Case #1 (2006)" from her "Private Residence" show.



Messer's paintings, thick with built-up paint, have long popped sculpturally off the wall. Here the artist, associate dean of painting at Yale, also offers portraits, such as an image of the lanky, disaffected-looking novelist Jonathan Safran Foer and his more enthusiastic dog, and several variations on canvas of the man/ape theme.

"Yes," painted this year, is a sweetly cartoonish version of the sculpture, and better delineated. In this work, the ape's enormous hands cup nothing, and he gazes up at them as if he's holding a precious gem. The word "yes" is scribbled in his fur. It's a philosophical riddle about desire and its object. Our nature is to want; this moves us forward, perhaps even drives evolution. But once we acquire what we want, it loses its power over us — it becomes empty. Messer captures this process with comic pathos.

### Inside Iran

Fotini Christia, a Harvard doctorate student in public policy who comes from Greece, spent last summer studying at the University of Tehran. She found herself riveted by giant, state-sponsored murals painted on many public and private buildings, and she took to documenting them.

Her photos can be seen in an exhibit cleverly installed by Iranian designer Ghazal Abbasy Asbagh. The exhibit effectively conveys the scale of the murals, which Christia says have become visual wallpaper to the people who live among them.

The scale — most are many stories high — and style recall heroic portraits from the Soviet Union or from China during the Cultural Revolution. There are many bold portraits here of religious leaders since the 1979 Islamic revolution and overthrow of the Shah — in particular the Grand Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei. But most of Christia's images portray Iranian soldiers killed during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s and viewed in Iran as martyrs.

There's also plenty of anti-American sentiment. A series of photos of murals around the former US Embassy, where Americans were taken hostage in 1979, excoriate the United States with images and words. In one, a hand wrapped in an American flag extends from a satellite dish, representing US broadcasting, holding a lighted match toward a pattern of blossoms symbolizing the flowers of the Islam-



ic revolution.

Christia's documentary photographs of propaganda murals show a side of Tehran that reveals much about Iranian values. The anti-American messages don't surprise as much the portrayal of martyrs, who take on the importance in Tehran's cityscapes that immense ads for vodka or sneakers have in ours.

### All about ads

Penelope Umbrico deconstructs ads in her witty photographs at Bernard Toale Gallery. She shoots images from Pottery Barn and Restoration Hardware catalogs, aiming to pin down these idealized home scenes. She has a funny series of photos, "Instances of Books as Pedestals," in which big coffee-table books are stacked, sometimes open, and hold tumblers of scotch and snifters of brandy.

Like the overstuffed pillows that litter the sofas in Umbrico's images, there's something swollen, cushy, and ultimately disturbing in the lifestyles these advertisements portray. As in the catalogs, Umbrico pulls us in with the lush pictures, but then she reminds us that it's all a construct by showing us the seams and edges of the catalog pages, or by blowing up the images to make them appear at lower resolution.

### Sam Messer: The Evolution of Desire

At: Nielsen Gallery, 179 Newbury St., through June 16. 617-266-4835, niensengallery.com

### Fotini Christia: Walls of Martyrdom: Tehran's Propaganda Murals

At: South Concourse Gallery, Center for Government and International Studies, Harvard University, 1730 Cambridge St., Cambridge, through July 31. 617-495-0713, wallsofmartyrdom.com

### Penelope Umbrico: Private Residence

### Tanja Alexia Hollander: Still

At: Bernard Toale Gallery, 450 Harrison Ave., through June 30. 617-482-2477, bernardtoalegallery.com

Tanja Alexia Hollander's gorgeous color photographs of Israel, also at Bernard Toale, are serene, endless landscapes. Hollander makes a practice of fuzzing out her horizon line, giving her scenes a velvety, magical feeling. "Untitled 64408, Zohar, Israel" sets craggy, sandy rock in the foreground fading into a sandstorm. The photo across from it, "Untitled 64616, Ein Bokek, Israel," is what you'd see if you stood on that rocky hill: a green sea, folded evenly with waves, drifting into a green sky.