

ART

Likeness: A Subjective Concept

By HELENA A. HARRISON

THE current exhibition at the Islip Art Museum, "Personae," interprets the question of likeness through the works of 22 portrait painters and sculptors.

The selections made by Karen Shaw, the museum's curator, are distinctly contemporary in scope, eschewing the type of "official" portrait that aims at a static, timeless quality and plays down artistic interpretation. Instead, even the most seemingly objective depictions are replete with subjective responses to personality and character.

For example, in John Ahern's sculpture "The Rat Killers (Louie and Ray)," the two boys, posed with the tools of their trade, are surrounded by the evidence of their hunting skill.

But instead of flashing smiles of triumph, their faces seem drained and haggard. Like soldiers sated by battle, they slump in attitudes of weariness and disgust.

Yvonne Puffer's "Art Star Cut-Out," a portrait of the graffiti artist Keith Haring, casts the subject as a suave entrepreneur. No more smock and beret, the outfit of a successful artist is now evening dress, she implies. Even with his features neutralized by a blank paper doll overlay, his star status would still be evident.

Ann Chwatsky's sensitive photographic studies of sisters place her subjects in their familiar surround-

ings and in relation to one another, emphasizing the bonds of heredity and shared experience.

Some, such as the very old couple who chat companionably, are apparently united by affection, while others seem indifferent to their associations. How accurately these images reflect the sisters' actual personalities and true feelings can only be surmised.

The extraordinary degree to which external trappings influence our perceptions of character are humorlessly highlighted by William Wegman, who has made a career of dressing his pet Weimaraners in zany getups.

His two examples in this show, "Early Dog" and "Renaissance Worm," are more allegorical than specific, casting the stoical Fay Ray as a kind of canine chameleon.

John Kirchner's assemblages suggest that character is the sum of accumulated wisdom, using stacks of books as surrogates for the human figure. Yet, this is by no means an endorsement of education, for the results are homogeneous to the point of anonymity, as the artist's "Accidental Man" attests.

Other artists strip away the subject's surroundings and zero in on the face, sometimes allowing it to act as the "mirror of the soul" and at others, using it more as a vehicle for their own esthetic investigations.

Baldwin Lee's "Double Portrait of a Young Man" captures an especially poignant moment of adolescence in two complementary photographs closely cropped to highlight the youth's introspection and vulnerabili-

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ty. His acne-covered skin appears as an outward manifestation of the emotional turmoil behind his inward-looking eyes.

The rough modeling of "Golden Stone," Robert Arneson's ceramic head of Jackson Pollock, emphasizes the fabled rawness of the late painter's character.

The features themselves, except for the characteristically furrowed brow, are calm enough, but the entire head is laced with the drips and spatters that obsessed Mr. Pollock as an artist. As with Mr. Lee's young man, his interior anxiety has erupted to the surface.

At the opposite emotional extreme, Chuck Close uses the face merely as a convenient reference point for the examination of perception.

His deadpan head shots of himself and friends are broken up into grids of tone produced by various means, including, in this show, fingerprints and hatched lines. The progressive distillation of the visual data that are essential for recognition, rather than the individual portrayed, is his true

subject.

In Blythe Bohnen's photographs, her own face is literally the vehicle for the creative act. The works are actually drawings made with the light reflected in her eyes.

With precise movements of her head, she registers these linear patterns on film. At the same time, the motion blurs her features, giving rise to a new and haunting persona in each image.

In fact, although they are only nominally self-portraits, Ms. Bohnen's images support the contention that each person has many faces and that no single portrayal can sum up his or her essence.

On the other hand, Dennis Ashbaugh's stain painting may be said to be a definitive portrait, for it is based on the genetic makeup of an individual, revealing the hidden uniqueness that lies beneath surface appearance.

"Personae" will remain on view through Nov. 5. The museum, at 50 Irish Lane in East Islip, is open Wednesday through Saturday from 10 A.M. to 4 P.M. and Sundays from 2 to 4:30 P.M.

A companion show, "Portrait/Self-Portrait," featuring four artists, is on view at the Anthony Giordano Gallery at Dowling College in Oakdale through Oct. 29.

The gallery, a satellite of the Islip Art Museum, is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10:30 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. and Sundays from 2 to 4:30 P.M.

Admission to both exhibitions is free.