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COLUMN: *Victoria Mares-Hershey*

Gallery show powerfully depicts Bush and the war

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An extreme close-up 38-by-70-foot rendition of only President Bush's eyes hangs in the front window of the Space Gallery and looks out onto Congress Street, an artist's statement when he could find no more words.

Michael Stewart calls the close-up, "Presidential Panic." It is part of his show, "States of Heads: Unauthorized Portraits," that opened at Space over the weekend. It contains quietly powerful statements about the figures that have overwhelmed our senses in these last four years. That sent Stewart seeking a form that would allow us to think above powerful chatter, political spins and blatant dishonesty.

The oil-on-canvas close ups are of the men in power around Bush's presidency: Vice President Dick Cheney, entitled "The Puppeteer," Donald Rumsfeld, "The Pedant," Paul Wolfowitz, "The Hawk," Ariel Sharon, "The Golem," L. Dennis Kozlowski, former CEO of Tyco, "The Fat Cat," Yasser Arafat, "The Prisoner," are frozen in a moment, the beauty of the oils a contrast to their deeds.

KEEPING HIM UP

The characters and their deeds in the Bush administration were keeping Stewart up at night in a state of fear and anger, searching for ways to express what he was thinking and feeling.

Years ago, before becoming an artist, he was an investigative reporter for the Hobart Gazette in Indiana, proud of uncovering a towing scandal in the police department. But he found himself without words to describe what he was seeing and feeling.



He started searching for a way say something that would cause people to re-evaluate the consequences of the current national leadership.

"I started painting portraits of mass murderers from photos I got from the Internet. At night I painted and kept saying to myself, 'What am I doing?' But when I finished I saw it was in the eyes, saying I'm trapped in hell, help me. "

He started painting Bush and then his cohorts in oils, because he said it is the medium that has been used for centuries to paint the ruling classes. The eyes have extraordinary expression.

"Bush's eyes have fear and indecision. He's always trying to over-compensate for the weakness. He surrounds himself with daddy figures. There are so many images of these men," said Stewart and he stood looking at the gallery wall, "we never really look at whom they are and what is going on. This is who these people are."

He has reached back into his journalism to write commentaries on each subject, their deeds and misdeeds for the show's catalogue.

Appearing in tandem with the Stewart show and in contrast to its silent figures is Matt Bucy's "Powers of Bush," showing on a small video screen in the second gallery at Space.

"Powers of Bush" is a DVD video. Bucy has made an endless video loop using 10,000 electronic images of the events, the carnage, the technology, and the abuses in the war in Iraq. He uses the images, photos from the Internet and television, to paint a motion picture of President Bush as he delivers the State of the Union Address.

Think of pointillism with thousands of small photos as the medium instead of paint. Bucy has taken the Internet and the television images that have inundated us to the point of desensitization and made us pay attention.

As the images of Abu Ghraib, war, and weapons appear and slowly form a slow-motion portrait of Bush, we can catch sentences and words: "The world without Saddam," "Abu Ghraib," "freedom."

Samantha Appleton's photo journalism exhibit, "Iraq: Unbound," hung on the walls of the second gallery as people moved quietly between the offerings. The soft and fearful face of a young boy, sheep grazing on meadow behind him, a cone of heavy black smoke on the horizon behind him, looked out of its frame. There were no commentators or spin-doctors to tell us what we were seeing.

OPENING CROWD

The Saturday night opening drew a cross-generational crowd that held on for a short time against the Red Sox playing on TV screens

around the city. Among the crowd were a young generation of writers, law students, health care professionals and educators, among people of other ages.

They talked: "Voting is an absolute necessity," said Michelle Stirling. "In other election years, it seemed the candidates were more moderate, but this regime does not need to compromise. They have been thinking about what they are doing now since the '70s and nothing will stop them."

"Ultimately," Stewart writes in the show's catalogue, "my hope is to elicit a visceral recognition of the mental and emotional condition of the individuals depicted and, hopefully, a re-evaluation of the consequences of letting them lead."

When all the words have been used and abused, lending no credence to another sentence, there has always been art.

Victoria Mares-Hershey is director of development at Portland West. She also is a member of the Maine Arts Commission and is a founder and the director of the Institute for Practical Democracy.

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