



Sara Belleau, *Abraham Unbinding Isaac*, 2006, inkjet print, 20x 24 inches



Sara Belleau, *David Meets Goliath*, 2009, inkjet print, 20x 24 inches



Sara Belleau, *Ruth Gleaning*, 2006, inkjet print, 20x 24 inches

Holy Land

Photographs by Sara Belleau

The concept of a “holy land” may be as much about heart as about a physical location. Often where we live, rather than a far-off land, is the place that is truly sacred. Sara Belleau’s *Holy Land* series brings the sacred and divine to the here and now. Re-creating scenes that are common to the Torah, Qur’an, and Old Testament, Belleau brings these shared stories into a modern Midwest setting.

Belleau makes use of the long-established iconography of traditional Christian art. Figures pose in formal stances, telling the story with maximum impact. Building on these art historical references, she often incorporates contemporary situations, the established storyline linking our ancient past with the human condition today. Other images illustrate how we remain the same in our basic values and desires. The simple beauty of *Ruth Gleaning* (2006) comes from its timelessness—a woman walking down a rural road, carrying a sheaf of wheat. Belleau has altered the iconography only slightly by including a modern slingshot, an allusion to King David, Ruth’s direct descendant.

Belleau focuses on the vital moment in a story, the moment of psychological impact in which a person must come to terms with his or her faith. In *Abraham Unbinding Isaac* (2006), God spares Isaac after testing Abraham’s faith by ordering him to sacrifice the boy. The rope is the tie that binds Abraham to both God and Isaac. Faced with the horror of sacrificing his own son, Abraham knew he would

also kill a part of himself. Now he raises his knife to cut the rope instead. Yet the situation’s complexity will leave the rope’s weight on them forever.

In *Lot’s Wife* (2006), a woman starts turning to salt as she looks back at a burning oil field. In the Bible, as Lot’s family fled the burning cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, his wife looked back and was transformed into a pillar of salt—a reminder that we must not turn back to our sins. Belleau’s work tackles issues of morality as they apply to Americans today who are grappling with economic greed, environmental degradation, and war.

Belleau absorbs the values expressed in these stories and looks for their relevance today. After six thousand years, she wonders, “Have we grown or changed? Are we any better now than we were then?” Is it possible that in a time of cultural and religious divisiveness, Jews, Muslims, and Christians still have much in common? While not especially religious, Belleau is not cynical in her questioning, say in the manner of Bill Maher’s 2008 documentary *Religulous*. Rather, she is curious about present-day applications of stories that have survived for millennia, seeking their role, if any, in contemporary American culture.

Belleau feels that succeeding generations have added new dimensions to these stories, and she continues a dialogue begun long

ago. She revisits the story elements that clearly connect to the here and now. In *David Meets Goliath* (2009), a young man bravely takes on a new giant, the oil industry, with only a slingshot, aiming across a cornfield at the drills in the distance.

These photographs are theater. Belleau painstakingly builds and paints each set in her studio. Because of this, the photographs begin to speak to one another as certain props reappear, interweaving the stories, as one visually begets another. Belleau’s constructed wheat field in the gallery forces the photographs into the present, into our time and space. Iconography is strewn throughout the field, making tangible the stories that many of us have grown up hearing in bits and pieces.

As the United States sinks into recession, Belleau’s photographs seem especially relevant. In *Job* (2006), a man covered in painful boils holds tight to the family farm, kneeling on the land that was once his life and livelihood. Today’s Job is a victim of corporate farming, subsidies, and drought. Like the biblical Job, we are asked to keep our faith despite tribulations. In creating links to the past, Belleau also poses important questions for the present. What are we willing to sacrifice, and for whom? How do we stay true to ourselves in the face of adversity? What preserves our moral center?

Sin and Guilt

Paintings by Nancy Robinson

The body, for many women, is a personal battleground. A thing to revile, pamper, and over-scrutinize. A thing to pluck, pull, stuff, and slather with paint to attract a mate or at least a little attention. Nancy Robinson’s vivid paintings explore women’s complex relationships with our bodies, sexuality, and unmeetable expectations. Her visual language incorporates fairy tales and myth in paintings that are complex, dark, and humorous.

Iconography and composition link Robinson’s work to Renaissance paintings, tweaked to conform to her world. Even today, in the twenty-first century, women live with the madonna/whore duality, which Robinson casually embraces—at one moment examining the competition among siblings (*Sibling Rivalry II*, 2009), then transforming into Diana the Huntress catching young men with a net and sporting a saucy fur bustier. “To diffuse self-prejudice, women must take control of and have pride in the sensuality of their own bodies and create a sensuality in their own terms, without referring to the concepts degenerated by culture” (Hannah Wilke, *American Women Artists*, 1980). Robinson re-creates the female of art history and contemporary culture in a more real, well-rounded version.

Robinson’s own image is often a central character in her paintings, embodying the extremes of feminine identity: goddess, vixen, ugly stepsister. Her portraits become universal tales that not only tell her own story, but also align her with many others. The roles she adopts infuse her with a confidence, power, and sexuality that one would never dare flaunt in real life. In *Yellow Self-Portrait* (2009) Robinson poses on a rock in a glamorously cut banana peel gown and long yellow gloves. Oblivious to the sullen putti around her, she confidently weathers the storm of love as it churns the seas and skies. Fish leap at heart-shaped lures in shark-infested waters. Does the dress imply that Robinson has won a round in this bout of love? The banana, an obviously phallic form that appears often in her work, is akin to the fruit bowl in Eric Fischl’s *Bad Boy* (1981) or Linda Nochlin’s comic *Buy My Bananas* (1972).

Self-Portrait as a Lady with a Squirrel (2009) readjusts the image of the virginal bride. The inspiration for *Squirrel*, Leonardo da Vinci’s *Lady with an Ermine* (1489–90), shows a simply dressed young

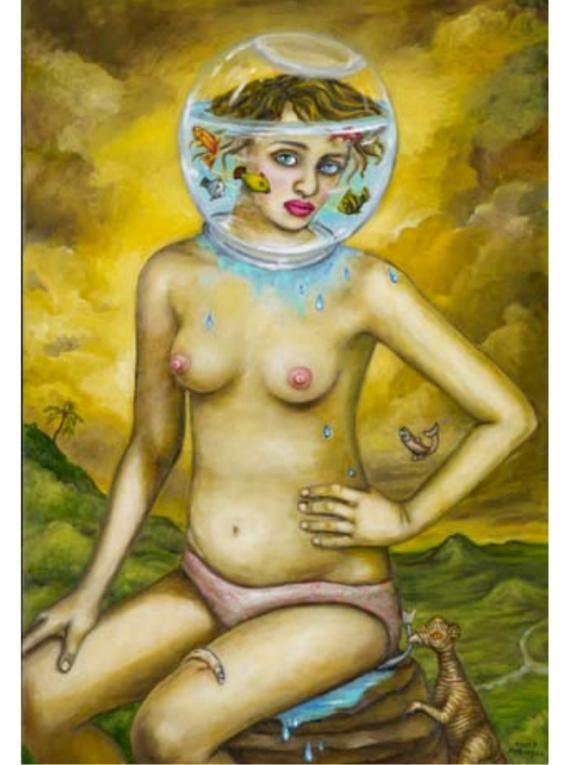


Nancy Robinson, *Self-Portrait as a Lady with a Squirrel*, 2009, oil on canvas, 30x 24 inches

woman holding an ermine in her arms. A fastidious creature, the ermine signified purity. Robinson sits in her bathrobe, hair tousled, recently awakened. Holding a squirrel messily eating a tomato, she embraces life’s messiness, dismissing traditional notions of purity.

Other paintings reveal the performance fatigue of a female still expected to conform to ideal beauty. Yet Robinson manages to inject humor. *The Before and After* (2006–9) series mocks the world of plastic surgery, penis enhancers, and psychoanalysis. Her portraits explore this constant conflict of desire to be looked at and aversion to the gaze. *The Exhibitionist* (2009) is an update of Barbara Kruger’s 1981 treatise *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face)*. It shows a young woman, nude except for the flowered panties that expose her inexperience. She is literally living in a fishbowl, a self-created world in which she is drowning. The ridiculousness of her situation is underscored by the small dinosaur

This exhibition is presented by the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program, an artist-run curatorial department of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, which is made possible by generous support from the Jerome Foundation.



Nancy Robinson, *The Exhibitionist*, 2009, oil on canvas, 36x 24 inches

feasting on the fish that have fallen out of the bowl on her head. Robinson acknowledges that even in the twenty-first century women live under male scrutiny, but she also implicates the exhibitionist. No longer victims of the gaze, we live in a celebrity-obsessed world where we sometimes fight for it, to our detriment.

Robinson’s work is filled above all with a lust, not only for the opposite sex, but for life itself. Robinson says that she lives to paint, and her brilliant palette and flawless technique testify to that. A skilled storyteller, she creates a beguiling world in which she is heroine, victim, and villain. In this fully fleshed-out world we have a portrait of the artist as friend, co-conspirator, lover, and big sister.

By Tamatha Sopinski Perlman, Program Associate for the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program.



Sin and Guilt
Paintings by Nancy Robinson

AND

Holy Land
Photographs by Sara Belleau

April 3 to May 31, 2009
Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program Galleries

Opening Reception: Thursday, April 2, at 7 p.m., MAEP Galleries

Gallery Talks: Thursday, April 23, at 7 p.m., *with Sara Belleau*

Thursday, May 14, at 7 p.m., *with Nancy Robinson*

Critics' Trialogue: Thursday, May 7, at 7 p.m., *with critic George Slade*

ALL EVENTS ARE FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC.

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For more information about the artists, this exhibition, and MAEP, visit:

Sara Belleau: sarabelleau.com

Nancy Robinson: nancyrobinson-arts.com

MAEP: www2.artsmia.org/wiki

Front: Nancy Robinson, *Yellow Self-Portrait* (detail), 2009, oil on canvas, 60 x 36 inches

Flap: Sara Belleau, *Baptism* (detail), 2008, inkjet print, 20 x 24 inches



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