Four portrait-focused exhibits are showing face at the Dairy Arts Center, including a 67-piece salon-style wall

Large-scale group exhibition, sourced from a public call, aims to redefine the traditional concept of portraiture

The “Portrait Gallery” exhibition was inspired directly by portrait galleries in prominent art institutions around the world. This salon-style hang on display at the Dairy Arts Center is meant to engulf the viewer in a sea of portraiture. (Drew Austin/Courtesy photo)

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If you happen to pop into the Dairy Arts Center any time over the next couple of weeks, chances are you're going to get all up in somebody's face.

Not that you'll get into a fistfight in Boulder's premiere multi-disciplinary arts center (although sometimes art can move you to do strange things), rather, you'll likely stumble across one of the many portraits currently embellishing the Dairy's gallery walls.

Earlier this month, four captivating portrait-focused exhibitions opened at the Dairy, each exploring a unique facet of the human visage.
The first exhibition, “From Me in Her to Her in Me” features an intimate and poignant body of work from Boulder artist Irene Delka McCray, which documents her mother’s final years in life as she struggled with Alzheimer’s.

McCray said in her exhibition statement, “The sluggish and indifferent response to the evident vulnerabilities of elderly citizens in care homes has prompted me to paint and draw my mother from memory, imagination, and photos taken of her through the windows that separated us throughout the lockdown.” The exhibit is up through Dec. 30.

Also featured at the Dairy is a two-person exhibition in the Hand Rudy Gallery, “Ghosts in the Light,” spotlighting work from Denver-based painter Benjamin Stanford and Boulder-based director and photographer Bruce Tetsuya.
Together, the pair explore the space between reality and fiction with a statement that reads: “Something shifts when you lean into the middle spaces; an internal landscape opens up in that liminal boundary that exists between reality and the edge of perception when you seek to find it.”

The exhibit is on display through Dec. 30.

Guest curator Todd Edward Herman, founder of Boulder indie art space East Window, brings a third exhibition to Creative Nations’ Sacred Space Gallery with “An Exploration of Resilience and Resistance: Our Backs Hold Our Stories.”
The exhibit features vintage-tinged wet plate photographs by Kali Spitzer, a queer Indigenous photographer living on the traditional unceded lands of the Tsleil-Waututh, Squamish and Musqueam peoples in British Columbia. Spitzer’s website reads that her artistic process “is informed by the desire to rewrite the visual histories of Indigenous bodies beyond a colonial lens.” The photos are on display through Jan. 26.

Rounding out the theme of portraiture is a massive group exhibition comprised of 67 pieces from 49 Colorado-based artists in the MacMillan Family Lobby and Polly Addison Gallery with the exhibit, “Portrait Gallery.”

Curator Drew Austin said he was inspired to bring a salon-style hang to the Dairy after visiting the Chrystral Bridges Museum of American Art back in 2020.

“I was completely taken by the gallery of portraits on view while I visited, and have not stopped thinking about it since,” Austin said. “There are many art institutions all over the world that have formal portrait galleries as part of their, often, permanent display and I wanted to riff off of that format for this exhibition after seeing how many artists throughout the state were working in portraiture from last year’s open call.”

Austin’s vision has been beautifully executed. When entering the MacMillan Family lobby, a torrent of faces greets the viewer; Some wearing expressions of sorrow, self-assurance and resignation; While others are less easily definable.

A young girl drapes her arm around an older man, a Mona Lisa smile visible beneath eyes that are completely black and hollow. The man smiles vaguely, beneath a curly mop of bright-red hair, reminiscent of a circus clown.

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“A lot of my work is relational and autobiographical,” Puma said. “This body of work, in particular, focuses on a period in my life from about (age) 6 to about 10 or 11 of severe amnesia, which is very common in children who experience trauma.”

The girl in the painting portrays Puma when she was 10 years old. The clown depicts her father.

“After my mom died, my relationship with my father was very intricate and very complex,” Puma said. “In my work, I usually paint him as a hero — or a clown. When I create, my process is that I don’t really have an intention, and once the painting is done, I take a step back and reflect on the finished product. I wasn’t intending to portray my father this way, but after I finished it, I looked at it and said ‘Oh, OK, that’s what this is.’”

Puma said that painting — especially painting portraits — is extremely therapeutic for her.

“I process my history this way, and I can’t seem to stop,” Puma said. “But it has helped me heal in a lot of ways. This piece was especially therapeutic because painting myself as a child feels very different than painting myself as an adult. I feel very sad for that little girl in the painting, but I don’t feel sad for myself now. I identify with her as though she’s somebody else.”

On the same wall, a couple of frames over, a young woman looks coyly into the distance, shrouding her face with a shy, yet alluring hand. While from afar, the woman is beautiful, but up close, something seems off — the canvas is draped in bloody strands. Moths and bugs dot the subject’s shoulders and cheekbones. Blue-green shadows bruise her delicate hands and face.
Like Puma, Denver-based artist Madison Brunetti’s painting “interlude: the second eternity” is also autobiographical. Brunetti’s self-portrait depicts her struggle with an eating disorder over the course of a decade, and how it affected her both internally and externally.

“The piece is meant to focus on how the disorder is so romanticized, not only by other people promoting eating-disordered behavior, but also by myself,” Brunetti said. “Eating disorders are so addictive because society says there is something attractive about those behaviors — even though you’re killing yourself and it’s deadly.”

“Interlude: the second eternity” is an interplay between the grotesque and the beautiful, because, as Brunetti explains, eating disorders are often invisible illnesses.

“I use a lot of bright colors to draw people in, and then upon closer inspection, I placed the bugs and embroidery and blood that seems to be coming from nowhere because my eating disorder wasn’t visible on the outside,” Brunetti said. “Nobody really knew what I was going through. It’s easy to put on a perfect facade and seem like you have everything together, but behind closed doors, everything is falling apart.”

While the bugs add a layer of the grotesque to her painting, Brunetti often incorporates insects into her work as a way to encourage the viewer to get closer and examine the small details up close.

“Entomology, you have to look closer,” said Brunetti. “It’s something you have to get near and investigate, and that’s what I want people to do with my art. I want people to get close to it. When I was struggling, I just really wanted someone to see me because I couldn’t ask for help.”
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For Puma, Brunetti, and Austin, portraiture creates a personal connection between the viewer and the subject, allowing for a form of communication that transcends time and space.

“There is something special about seeing a lot of different humans and viewpoints all in one place at the same time,” Austin said. “You are forced to see connections and differences. Your brain is working overtime to place everything in relation or in a timeline to each other when really the conglomerate is what prevails in this exhibition, and in life. We are all mixed together and need to harmonize and I think this exhibition presents a little slice of what that could look like.”
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