

Melora Griffis – "Portraits"

It is probably no coincidence that Melora Griffis' small, expressionistic heads resemble theatrical masks, for this artist grew up in a family of actors and has trained and worked as both performer and painter. Those two pursuits neatly dovetailed not long ago, when Griffis created full-length portraits of cast members from a Chekhov play in which she was appearing. Her heads, however, assume a theatricality all their own.

This sense of play stems as much from their vaudevillian facial distortions as from their rather whimsical headdresses. They also seem illuminated by footlights. Though referred to by name, they have no specific identities. That doesn't matter. These are not really portraits, only manifestations of character and mood, human to a fault. At once grotesque and comic, world-weary and naïve, they don't seem so much brushed onto canvas as extricated from layers of paint, meeting the eye like figures emerging from behind a scrim. It is almost as if the painter's mind is a puppet theater, whose animated stars she has pushed forward to take their bows. That makes sense, for what is the canvas if not a stage on which an artist dances? For Melora Griffis, the curtain has just gone up.

--Linda Yablonsky