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Several works in RCC's “Take Me to the River” guide you there

Rock and Soul Bishop Al Green made the phrase famous when, in 1974, he penned his legendary sexual/religious anthem to being in love with an underage girl (a song he removed from his repertoire when he became a minister). Morality aside, “Take me to the river,” both in song and in spirituality, denotes the physical and emotional desire to be cleansed of one’s former self, and to travel the path of truth—either by organizational dogma or personal doctrine. Artists are as familiar with this concept as anyone else, of course, and could argue that they’re even more emotionally entrenched in the war of dismantling preconceptions of self and exposing that vulnerable inner light—or at least that they’re better at expressing it than, say, a corporate CEO.

In the RCC Quad Gallery’s show of the same title, Jay Merryweather, Karen Kauffman, Mike Nichols and Andrew Barsom likewise offer glimpses of their artist souls-in-progress through a series of works that range from figurative surrealism to monochromatic abstraction.

Kauffman’s large scale acrylic on wood *Corollas Bloom* and *Stream Pebble Vortex*, are certainly the most ethereal and soulful representations of journey and discovery, easing our over-stimulated brains into basic shape and movement recognition highlighted in tones that speak to our most primary senses. Stare at the snow white circle and shades of gray in *Corollas Bloom* for 15 seconds and note a sudden calmness within as well as an intuitive understanding that this—this very moment—is what presence feels like. The oblong shapes and darker definition of *Stream Pebble Vortex* moves that impression into more complexity and definable objects that, just like us, appear to still be in their infancy. As the title suggests, we find her the cyclical and the eternal.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, R. Mike Nichols speeds us into a topsy-turvy world of the figurative made literal that reflects the absurdity of just being alive—and how using that absurdity to one’s advantage can be freeing. Set against a fiery cotton candy sky, *Floating 1* finds a hipster dressed in a smart, lime green suit with two bull dogs in tow, hovering just inches above the Joshua-Tree speckled desert floor, caught up in a moment of meditative revelry. Similar buoyant tranquilities envelope other young men in electric orange and purple suits in *Floating 2, 3, and 4*, who drift both subconsciously and literally over golf courses (watched here by Pan, the nature god and goatly flautist) and swimming pools. For anyone familiar with the iconic Talking Heads’ song, “And She Was,” the series embodies the same notion of having *inner* out-of-body experiences where one is unrestrained by laws, either natural or human.

Finally, Jay Merryweather presents several of his idealized female forms in various stages of contemplation and frenzy, but it’s the minute and easily overlooked *Untitled* that resonates the most, and that makes her aptly named: unlike the larger and more polished images that crowd her, *Untitled* is very much a nameless, regular girl, and is, in fact, almost faceless. But it’s here, within her dark, troubled eyes that we find the depth of her soul—a place where light seems to struggle to survive, floating is only a wish, and thoughts of the eternal offer no comfort. Here is where the journey to the river begins, and its time and toll are always left to the unknown.

“Take Me to the River” at Quad Gallery, Riverside Community College, 4800 Magnolia Ave., Rm 140, Riverside, (951) 222-8358; www.academic.rcc.edu/art/exhibitions.jsp. Tues-Thurs, 10am-3pm. Free. Thru April 5.