

'Images' show turns the page on portraiture

By Mary Thomas
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ART REVIEW

"Moving Images (Portraits)," which opened last night at the Wood Street Galleries, includes some captivating video installations that, coincidentally, show the proficiency artists have achieved with the medium. Technology is integrated so that it's no longer the 200-pound gorilla that stands between the viewer and appreciation of the artwork.

But, as the title implies, the exhibition is about more than that. Six artists, including two women, from the United States, Canada and Europe explore the genre of portraiture, at times referencing the art's historical past and at others forging new directions.

Seminal video figure Bill Viola's "Memoria," a work about recognition and memory in which a man's face filmed with an early black-and-white surveillance camera fades in and out of articulation on a square of silk, is subtle and effective.

The notion of recognition — how we perceive and interpret others — runs through the exhibition, and the viewer's confrontation with the presented images is exacerbated by the fact that they're animated.

Flanking Viola's piece are two very different works with unexpected commonalities, not the least of which is how mesmerizing they are.

Dutch artist Bea de Visser brings her talents as painter and filmmaker to "The Skipping Mind," a compelling work inspired by a small black-and-white photograph that she purchased in a Prague flea market and carried with her for months. During that time she "read" the "anonymous image from the past" — "the shoulder line, the features of the hair" — and gained some insight into her subject.

She painted 25 portraits, in a variety of poses, based on the photograph, digitalized them and produced an uncanny short video that morphs the painted images, creating an awkward sculptural reality.

De Visser believes that, particularly in this era of heightened terrorism, "reading images is one of the main things we have to teach and have to learn.... It's one of the

first things you learn and one of the first things you really need in a society. We have to reinvent this visual contact toward the other — you have to learn to see through the mask."

She's interested, also, in those areas "where the personal becomes universal and the universal becomes personal," and in one of life's ironic twists, de Visser entered a new relationship with this piece. On the last day of its run in Prague, a small boy walked into the gallery and said, "That's my mother!" As it turned out, it was actually his grandmother, who's now 83: The anonymous everywoman became an individual, who will be the subject in a film that the artist is making about "where art and reality gradually melt down into the realm of imagination."

For the humorous, low-tech "The Scream," Brooklyn artist Gregory Barsamian cast 16 self-portraits variously altered so that as they spin past two strobe lights their lips appear to open, emit a variety of objects — including a house, boot and shark — and eventually swallow the heads. Inspired by a 19th-century zoetrope device, the heads make 13 revolutions per second (imperceptible, but the artist leaves a visual clue in the exposed base), compared to 18 to 24 frames per second for movie film.

As with de Visser's work, the serious side of this work speaks to the gaps that we fill in — in perception and reception — to form the truths we know and operate by. This morphing of the intuitive, empirical and intellectual — expressed in the visual and the verbal that do their own strange dance of complement and opposition — constructs the world(s) we occupy.

The visitor enters very private worlds in AK Dolven's two unnerving projected paintings, "Puberty" and "Portrait with a Cigarette." The former takes title and imagery from Edvard Munch's 1893 painting of a nude girl on a white-sheeted single



Detail from "The Skipping Mind" by Dutch artist Bea de Visser, which was inspired by an anonymous photograph she found in a Prague flea market.

bed, but Dolven adds headphones, and the visitor, while listening to the vulgar pop lyrics the isolate sitter presumably hears, may be startled as she ever so slightly moves her body in response to the rhythms. (A high school field trip to this artwork could inspire revealing dialogue.)

The latter work surprises when the coolly detached, somewhat arrogant young blond woman, whose gaze follows the visitor about the gallery, flicks a remote at the visitor and abruptly changes the sound he's immersed in.

Other works include a return by Luc Courchesne, who exhibited at Wood Street last year and whose interactive virtual reality "Portrait One" allows a seductive conversation with an attractive young French woman; Bruce Cannon's "Reflection," a clever digital work that comments on the composition and expectations of self-portraits; and a second fine work by de Visser, "Blink," a "Family of Man"-like loop of briefly appearing video portraits projected on two 62- by 84-inch hanging screens that call to mind Steina Vasulka's cascading waters exhibited in the space several years ago.

"Portraits" is at 601 Wood St. (enter from Sixth Avenue and take the elevator to the second and third floors) through March 16. Hours are 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday and

Wednesday, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Thursday through Saturday. For information, call 412-471-5605. Bill Judson, curator of film and video at the Carnegie Museum of Art, will give a free talk on "The Video Art of Bill Viola" at 12:15 p.m. March 12 at The Library Center, Downtown. For information, call 412-622-3288.