

Portraits That Tell a Lot

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GREAT NECK

PORTRAITS are not a favorite subject matter of contemporary art. They are seen as contrived, artificial, somewhat stagey, not at all appealing to sensibilities that prefer more casual, less rhetorical forms of art. If portraits are commissioned, they can look dictated. Many artists shy away from portrait painting, for it represents too much of a compromise and does not encourage the artists to be themselves.

Shirley Gorelick, whose portraits are on view at the Great Neck Library, manages to blend formality with informality in an effective way without ever appearing too casual or too contrived. At least the best portraits in the exhibition are the ones that reveal themselves in such a manner. The less fascinating works hinge too heavily on pose and demeanor. In these one gets the impression that the sitters attempted to look at ease without ever succeeding.

Most of the time, however, Miss Gorelick is at home with her sitters, if they are with her. They seem to be sitting in their living rooms or going about their tasks without heeding the intrusion of a painter who is chronicling their faces and personalities.

Miss Gorelick has a gift for going beyond the physicality of her people, too, which she does with remarkable deftness. While we certainly can't help but notice the stylistic precision in the rendering of eyes, a nose, a cheekbone or a hairline, the character of the individual prevails, inexorably imposing itself upon us. Not that the painter's sitters are unbearably assertive. They simply let us get to know them.

This happens through the mood established in the pictures and through the intensity of the personalities. Miss Gorelick just does not choose people who are uninteresting, it seems. We get to know these people in paint and want to know them in the flesh as well, if indeed there is a difference. The Bensons, Sid and Lisa and Gunny and Lee are compelling couples with a prepossessing presence.

Miss Gorelick has a commanding technique, full of bravura accuracy. Her brush submissively does what she orders it to do. And yet her style is never parsimoniously tedious. She can care for detail, while subsuming it into the sweep of the whole picture. Who cannot help but notice a bright striped



'Gunny and Lee II,' by Shirley Gorelick

blouse or a conspicuous fan chair? For all their evocative interest, though, they remain adjuncts to the painterly, emotional thrust of the works.

No matter how still her sitters are — they're usually sitting and one is lying, taking a snooze — the paintings are dynamic visual experiences, made dynamic through well-crafted and provocative compositions. Miss Gorelick especially likes to group two people together, something she does with flair, demonstrating a strong psychological nexus between the two sitters.

The pictures with more than two figures never seem to work so well, though, since they are a bit burdened and ungainly. One work, however, "Chess Game," is a multiple-figured painting with marvelous strength and variety.

The exhibition will remain on view through Jan. 24. The library is open Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays from 9 A.M. to 9 P.M., Wednesdays from 10 A.M. to 9 P.M., Saturdays from 9 A.M. to 6 P.M. and Sundays from 1 P.M. to 5 P.M. ■