

4 Artists' Melancholic Reflections

FOUR ASIAM-AMERICAN ARTISTS: SABBETH ART GALLERY.
WUNSCH ARTS CENTER; 1 FOREST AVE., GLEN COVE; THROUGH FEB. 16.

By Elizabeth Wix

ALL AMERICANS can consider themselves hyphenated in some way, members of a subgroup who may have little in common except their geographic origin. However, the four Asian-American painters whose work is on show at the SABBETH ART GALLERY in Glen Cove do share one thing — the pervasive melancholy of their work. Surely, there are other Asian-Americans whose art is quite different in mood, who paint cheerful photorealist renditions of skyscrapers and hamburger stands, but this show, at least, has a powerful unity of feeling.

All four of these accomplished figurative painters, who were born outside the continental United States (two in Hawaii, one in East India and the other in Vietnam), demonstrate a preoccupation with a spiritual and inner world.

Cyril Rokui, who is represented by two large works in acrylic on paper, is a master of the presentation of estrangement and sorrow. In "Show Me Your True Face," a two-part piece, a solitary figure rises out of a somber, loosely worked background of blacks and browns and seems to be poking at a disembodied head on the earth beneath him. His other piece, "Shadows in the Endless Night," is more complex but rendered in the same unrelievedly joyless tones. On the left of the painting are four clothed, standing figures, then four floating heads over what appears to be an abyss, and, next to this, naked figures huddle together in postures reminiscent of Picasso in his blue period. On the extreme right, and separated from the others, is a solitary figure in black as chilling as Death in Ingmar Bergman's "The Seventh Seal."

Equally disquieting and strange are Long Nguyen's small acrylics on paper in which the images seem to float out at you in burning, jewel-like tones from dark and shadowy backgrounds. "Pod Forms" shows brilliant red pods gleaming against an almost black ground. "Yellow Head" is, in fact, a face done in scarlet, and you see that the skull is cracked and bored with holes. All his paintings seem imbued with pain. His "Garment I" is of two headless women bathing in a river of Stygian gloom.

Tara Sabharwal's small, elusive and dreamlike watercolors, suffused with vibrant color, recall Emile Nolde's works. In "Sleepless," a couple lie on a bright yellow sheet beneath a pea-green coverlet with a woman attendant beside them. One wonders what the relationship is among the three. Similarly enigmatic is "Red Room," where a vulnerable, naked woman lies on a table, and a man is entering the room while another woman watches. The series of painted etchings, numbering one through

nine, consists of variations on a theme of one standing and one recumbent figure.

All four of Charles Yuen's large oils on canvas are full of symbols and riddles from religion and myth. In "Emerald Chalice," two stylized figures — one yellow, the other blue — seem to be seeking to grasp the jewelled cup. This theme of searching is repeated in "Ali Baba," where one figure is disappearing into a magic jar, and in "Three Monkeys," where two face us and the third's face is hidden. Yuen works in bold, flat areas of color, and one discerns the influence of his Indian heritage.

As Bob Lee, the curator of the show, suggests: "Compelling issues under unusual circumstances generate paintings which wrestle with difficult problems and elude simple solutions." This is a powerful and intriguing exhibition.

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