

On The Town

Anything can happen in this world of collages

By Fred Camper, Special to the Tribune

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Some artists make their best work in their later years--as James Garrett Faulkner's retrospective at the **Hyde Park Art Center**, mostly collages taken from the last two decades, reminds us.

Faulkner, 72, is a lifelong Chicagoan whose work reflects the surrealism and quirky humor that have long characterized the city's art scene. Influenced by a lifetime of study and travel, he's a sensualist at heart. His juxtapositions make each collaged element seem lush, while the surfaces vibrate with erotic energy. Some scenes, such as in "Field & Stream," in which a young woman has caught a giant, phallic fish, are immediately amusing. But at his best, Faulkner's densely layered cultural references portray an upended world in which anything is possible.

Many pieces are playfully physical. In "Farfalle Bevendo" (Butterflies Drinking), butterflies flit about the legs of a nude form; the overall suggestion is of a drinking fountain for butterflies. "History of the Belt" juxtaposes an ancient Cycladic sculpture, a classical torso, and a photograph of a male bodybuilder. Its humor--and statement--come from Faulkner's placement of the messiness of actual life beside these idealized forms: the folds on the man's skin are never going to seem as perfectly rhythmic as the folds on the torso's sculpted garments.

Other works are wildly improbable. The girl in "Madness in Children," set against an extravagantly decorative floral background, has eyes that seem to literally bug out (they are glass eyes Faulkner purchased at a Paris taxidermist). She is doubtless viewing another Faulkner piece--her reaction mirrors the viewer's.

"The Flight Into Egypt" is one of the best in a show of some 100 works. A diptych shows a groom leading a horse, taken from a George Stubbs painting; it omits the center, but a leg suggests the holy family typically shown in "Flight Into Egypt" paintings. Niagara Falls roars in the background of each half, in each flowing toward the center--leading the eye toward the gap between images, and an imagined plunge. Like many of Faulkner's juxtapositions, this one undermines stability with contradictions, pairing the title subject's reference to an escape to safety with a central void. It's the vision of a world without ground that makes flights of fancy possible.

At 5307 S. Hyde Park; 773-324-5520.