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Brian Knep's "Frog Triplets," at the Judi Rotenberg Gallery, is based on photographs of growing tadpoles that he digitally assembled into short loops.

GALLERIES

An unfinished look at the cycle of life

The Boston Globe

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent | April 26, 2007

"Aging," Brian Knep's beautiful if unfinished show at the Judi Rotenberg Gallery, doesn't really address growing old, mortality, or physical decline. Instead he turns the wheel of the life cycle into visual poetry; there's no end and no beginning. The new-media artist has been developing this work during a two-year residence at Harvard Medical School, making videos of the life cycles of frogs.

His videos are run by computers, which subtly alter the image so you never see the same thing twice. "Frog Time" shows the little fellow morphing from giant-headed tadpole to frog and back as he ceaselessly swims across a grid. It's absorbing and frustrating to watch; the rush from infancy to adulthood and back fascinates, but the constant swimming through the grid is tedious, like the frog's version of a rat race. "Frog Path," a series of photos, has a stronger narrative arc -- actually, two -- but our intrepid hero is still as hapless as the rest of us.

Knep is known for his interactive work, and nothing in this show is yet interactive. The video "Frog Triplets," in which three morphing frogs appear side by side, as in the lanes of a swimming pool, is a work in progress that he hopes to make interactive; that would be intriguing. As it is, the constant

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'RELATED'

Brian Knep : Aging and

Carmin Karasic : Handheld Histories as Hyper-Monuments

At: Judi Rotenberg Gallery, 130 Newbury St., through Saturday . 617-437-1518 , judirotenberg.com

Conley Harris : Paintings and Drawings

At: Victoria Munroe Fine Art, 179 Newbury St., through May 5 . 617-523-0661, victoriamunroefineart.com

Interface

At: Sherman Gallery at Boston University, 775 Commonwealth Ave., through May 4 . 617-358-0295, bu.edu/cfa/visual

evolution and devolution of his frogs is bittersweet as they race for the finish line.

Knep and Carmin Karasic each have work up for just this week at Judi Rotenberg as part of the Boston Cyberarts Festival. Karasic's "Handheld Histories as Hyper-Monuments" sends you out in the street with a cellphone equipped with GPS and Internet access. This is the third such Cyberarts project. Each gets more technologically savvy and conceptually rich.

This time, Karasic and collaborators Rolf van Gelder and Rob Coshow add video to the mix. For each site featured, such as Old South Church, you watch the monument move back through history, read little texts about what happened there, or listen to audio. You're also invited to add your own stories, impressions, and images (the cellphone has a camera, natch).

The interactivity moves "Handheld Histories" beyond its predecessors; the user gets to claim his or her part of history, and that's exciting. At the same time, a virtual tour, even with all its delicious metaphors, unfortunately mediates first-hand experience of the monuments and turns this into a head trip.

Homage to the past

Conley Harris is a historian and a painter's painter. His lush paintings and works on paper at Victoria Munroe Fine Art pay tribute to the history of Indian painting, while using it to explore questions of composition, tone, figure/ground relationship, and other painterly issues.

The artist takes images from old Indian drawings and paintings and uses them to his own ends. "The Wandering Poet" is a canvas featuring a classic Indian romantic figure; his robe is iridescent, and the evening sky behind him murmurs with color. Harris has drawn large a detail from a paisley pattern beside the poet, over a flowering shrub. That detail, floating on the painting's surface, fiery and transparent, could be the poet's muse.

Even more than the paintings, the works on paper in watercolor, gouache, and pastel make both history and process transparent. "Men Embracing" features two figures drawn over a rendering of Krishna. Washes of color pull you into the scene, as do the flowing sleeves and circling arms of the men.

Through centuries, families of Indian artists would keep unfinished drawings to refer to, borrowing from this piece or that to make a new one. Harris layers and unites images that a 17th-century Punjabi artist never would, but in his own way, he's working in the same tradition, and with the same deep respect.

Co-opting the new

Painting is an old medium that must constantly co-opt the new to remain a force in contemporary art. "Interface," a group show at the Sherman Gallery at Boston University put together by Dana Clancy and Lynne Cooney, looks at how four artists make portraits from mediated source material -- photo, video, and digital imagery.

Catlin Rockman's bright and smudgy superhero paintings capture the fuzzy pixilation of low-resolution digital imagery. This technique works best in the one larger painting, "Power #2," which includes a landscape backdrop.

Nataliya Bregel paints from home videos of her parents. One work, such as "Shaving," comprises several small paintings of a single act, incorporating the poor lighting and inadequate exposure of the video. The accumulation of images celebrates the mundane.

Hannah Barrett's version of 19th-century photographic portraits is both hysterical and dead serious. Barrett has been melding the features of men

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and women for years to make weird but endearing androgynous characters. She does the same here, posing them formally in black and white, with precision and gravity.

Catherine Kehoe offers some of the same portraits of distant family members derived from scanned old photos that she showed at Howard Yezerski Gallery earlier this year; she uses the lack of information in her source material as a starting point for her modernist-inflected canvases.■

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