

Liliana Porter uses figurines, toys and humor to examine complicated human emotions

Almost every Tufts student has at one time or another taken a stroll down Newbury Street, but not many have taken the opportunity to enjoy the relaxing effects of Newbury's one and only free activity: gallery viewing. Located at 10 Newbury St., right next to Juicy Couture, is a non-descript door that leads to one of the true gems for viewing contemporary art in Boston: the Barbara Krakow Gallery. Located on the fifth floor (don't worry, there is an elevator) is this simple, well-organized space that makes up for its lack of size in the quality of its contents, which are both intellectually stimulating and cheerful, for the most part.

The current exhibition mainly consists of works by two contemporary artists, but one in particular is bound to catch the eye. This work, which blurs the boundaries between painting and sculpture, is that of the Argentinean-born artist, Liliana Porter. She creates unique pieces by drawing from her collection of miniscule toys and figurines that look like the type of objects one would find in a Cracker Jack box. She combines these tiny ready-made toys with minimalist oil paintings and pencil sketches to produce pieces of art that are almost theatrical in their static simplicity. Her works are fueled by a sense of humor that has the ability to catch the attention of a diverse audience ranging from small children to art historians.

One of her most fascinating pieces, entitled "To Do That," consists of an expansive white canvas with a tiny figure placed in the center. This little man holds a

pick-axe, which he ardently drives into the canvas, making a long, deep gash that is infinitely larger than the man himself. Although this figure is merely a child's play thing, he has an incredibly human presence that inspires compassion and empathy in the viewer. The feeling of solitude that emanates from this simple composition creates a universal sentiment that leaves the viewer wondering what the plight of this figure could possibly be that he would work with such fervor to destroy the very ground on which he stands.

Many of these qualities are repeated in the other nine works by Porter that inhabit the small gallery space. Common themes of loneliness, existentialism and philosophical contemplation can be found in each of these unique pieces. The playful quality that pervades most of her works is especially present in "Dialogue with Sitting Man," which joins two parts that are entirely uninteresting when viewed separately, but come together to create a piece that penetrates the viewer's space and toys with his or her mind.

From a distance, this piece seems to merely be a large white canvas with a simple black peacock painted in the top right corner, but as one approaches the work to take a closer look one will encounter a spiral platform that juts out from the wall, holding a small plastic man who is perfectly aligned with the peacock's head and gazes intently into the blank eyes of the bird. Are you the viewer or is he? What is real and what is "art?" These are just some of the countless questions that the viewer will ask if he or she is fortunate enough to experience this piece.

However, not all of Porter's creations are so light-hearted, and "To See Blue III" is testament to this observa-

tion. While this piece still features Porter's familiar monumental blank canvases and is populated by a cast of tiny plastic figurines, the thematic content of this piece is much heavier. A tidal wave of thick blue paint spills over the top right portion of the canvas and consumes everything in sight. An image of death and destruction is created as toy soldiers armed with guns and cannons pillage a small, helpless town.

By using children's toys to compose a violent image of war, Porter creates a certain dissonance in the viewer, ranging from feelings of wanting to reach out and play with the figures to a deep sadness that conjures up images of the current warfare being experienced all over the world today.

With her creative vision and unique medium, Porter has created a type of art that must truly be experienced in person in order to absorb the full content and value of her work. This show is well worth the short ride on the T and is guaranteed to leave one wondering how something as simple as a toy positioned on a blank canvas could make a person think so deeply about his or her own life and position in the world. If nothing else, it is a cheap venture in which one ends up back on Newbury Street with a still full wallet, ready to shop the day away.

Liliana Porter
At the Barbara Krakow Gallery,
through April 9
10 Newbury St.
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KRAKOW GALLERY