



## Lexington Art League figures a way forward: reinventing its nude show



Xaviera Simmons, *One Day and Back Then (Standing)*. Charles Bertram [cbertram@herald-leader.com](mailto:cbertram@herald-leader.com)

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In the one of the galleries at the Lexington Art League's Loudoun House, light-blue crushed glass spills out of two identical wooden boxes arranged at an angle on the floor. Surrounded by walls of self-portraits — focused on the human form, the shape and structure of the body — the boxes, an installation piece by Louisville artist Chris Radtke called *Curl*, might seem out of place.

Its message, however, fits with the collection.

Stephanie Harris, the executive director of the Lexington Art League says Radtke's work deals heavily in symbolism. For example, she works in pairs to represent the X and Y chromosomes — hence the two boxes — and *Curl* is a self-portrait because the weight of the glass in each box is equivalent to her body weight.

Pieces like these, guest-curated by Julien Robson, are helping the Art League reinvigorate its annual study of the nude, resulting in a poignant examination of the figure through the lens of self-portraiture in contemporary art.

The collection compiled by Robson, the former contemporary art curator at the Speed Museum in Louisville, spans decades and themes, and it's a version of the popular *Nude* exhibition that ran for 37 years at the Loudoun House galleries. The time during which LAL took a break from this series, along with additional regular programming that members of the organization had come to expect, was a growth period for the organization — a time for renewal, although that came with some hardship. "It was very much a rebirth," Harris says. "We were able to use our space for free discovery and do some innovative things in the community that weren't possible before because there was a lack of time for original programming."

During 2014, the Art League presented programs mostly outside its home base at the Loudoun House. That included the moon-like light sculpture at Main Street and Broadway by Canadian artists Caitlind r.c. Brown and Wayne Garrett. The sculpture was the centerpiece of the winter 2014 exhibit *Luminosity*. However, even as the organization was able to expand its reach with exhibitions outside of Loudoun House, those projects resulted in budgetary problems. Overall, the group reported a \$126,926 deficit last year with \$781,386 in revenue, resulting in budget cuts, including layoffs, and soul-searching. Prompted by the fallout from the financial crisis, LAL was able ultimately to engage on a deeper level with Lexington's artistic wants and needs, Harris says.

"We had a panel with Lexington artists about their thoughts on the community, and then sent out a survey to our members," Harris says. "That was vital feedback that we were able to take back to the boardroom and staff meetings to establish how best to move forward as a contemporary arts organization."

Now armed with community feedback, Harris says, the Art League is bringing back a version of the organization's annual nude art show. She says it's important to note that this is not a return to *The Nude*. The new show, *Artist: Body*, is an intense self-analysis that places contemporary art as idea not item, and the human figure as form rather than object; the work is meant to provoke thought beyond nudity.

For example, there is a trio of self-portraits by Lexington artist Louis Zoellar Bickett in which the artist looks frail, with a cane. In each photograph, he holds a different religious text in his hand — a nod to his own mortality.

*Artist: Body* promises to be a dynamic survey that spans both time and evolving attitudes about the human body, as well as concepts of self, Harris says. *Artist: Body* includes works by Bickett, John Coplans, Julius Deutschbauer, Bryce Hudson, Thaniel Ion Lee, Gabriel Martinez, Cynthia Norton, Cindy Sherman, Xaviera Simmons, Kiki Smith, Annie Sprinkle, Hannah Wilke, Sam Taylor Wood and others.

Completely dedicated to self-portraiture, this exhibition examines the human form through photography, mixed media and installation art. The concepts presented are diverse and lead to a show that is simultaneously romantic, sensual, raw and, at times, challenging in its presentation of the body.

After the Art League's two-year period of trial, growth and reassessment, Harris says she hopes that it has found a sustainable middle ground for the organization that will extend past this show; where local and regional artists are shown alongside national and international artists as a way to demonstrate that their work plays into global art trends.

"This survey tells a story beyond the individual," Harris says. "It provides a regional context that supports a national narrative about what is happening in the art world."