

Recurring images

Painter Leveille relies on her unconscious

By Hugh Hart

While novelists frequently say their characters take on a life of their own, it is far more unusual to hear a painter speak in those terms. But that is precisely how Elgin artist Bert Leveille regards her work.

"The characters were much more vague in the beginning, just a blotch or a line of color," she said. "Then I started to add plaster on canvas, and the creatures begged to come off the canvas."

The results of Leveille's transformations can be seen at Schaumburg's Prairie Center for the Arts, where her multimedia sculptural environments are on display.

Leveille said she relies heavily on her unconscious for direction. "I believe that when we open up our minds, things will come to us. So I try to keep my mind open, and wipe off the blackboard every time I sit down to work, hoping that my unconscious will tell me more than my conscious mind can tell myself."

The characters that bubble up from Leveille's imagination are not readily apparent in day-to-day life. "Although my creatures have some human traits, they're not humans," she explains. "I think of them as being more universal, from another time or some other part of the universe."

Leveille originally gave up her artistic aspirations in grade school, when she said an art teacher "went around the room picking out the best drawings of a teddy bear, and she did not pick mine."

But while studying acting at Elmhurst College, Leveille was drawn again to painting. She graduated with an art degree and spent several years as a "closet painter" before beginning to exhibit her work in the late '70s. Leveille now belongs to a Chicago artists' collective, Space 900.

In her exhibit, Leveille combines three-dimensional characters with large tunnels, which were incorporated into a dance concert at the show's opening earlier this month. She became interested in using large tunnels several years ago.



One of Leveille's works at the Schaumburg Prairie Center for the Arts, where her multimedia sculptural environments are on display.

"Tubes started showing up whenever I did water colors," she said. "For a long time I kept trying to get inside these tubes to see what's in there. By making them three-dimensional tunnels, large enough to go inside, I'm creating a dialogue. By bringing tunnels to life, so to speak, I hope to find out what it means."

Leveille grows so familiar with some of the recurring images that she gives them names. One of the characters at the Prairie Center was originally called Gretchen, she explained with a laugh, "but one of the dancers from the opening changed its sex and named it Fred."

"My show is an experiment in fantasy, but then, fantasy could be reality. I was always fascinated with how the microscopic view of something looks completely different from what we see."

"That's why I don't tie myself down to recognizable. I'm off in my own world."

Leveille's "Experiment in Fantasy" is on display through Dec. 3 at the Prairie Center For the Arts, 201 Schaumburg Ct., Schaumburg. Free admission. Call 708-894-3600.



Elgin artist Bert Leveille combines three-dimensional characters with large tunnels.