

VISUAL ART

EYE ON ART / Tom Patterson

Artist-graduates shine in Guilford College exhibit

GUILFORD COLLEGE — It's one thing to be a student artist, creating one's work within the supportive atmosphere of an art school, college or university, but it's quite another to be an artist in what students like to call "the real world," where the public often seems indifferent or hostile to artistic concerns.

This was one of the main issues raised last month at an "Alumni Art Exchange" at Guilford College. The meeting provided an occasion for the college's current art majors to meet with Guilford alumni who have established successful art careers.

The idea behind the meeting was to let the students learn about career development and networking opportunities in the arts from sympathetic individuals with direct experience.

In conjunction with the exchange, which took place March 22, the Guilford College Art Gallery opened an "Alumni Art Exhibit" that will remain on view through May 31.

The show includes works by 48 artists who were once students at Guilford, and it's a highly diverse selection. Among the works on view are ceramic vessels, furniture and fabric pieces, as well as paintings, sculpture and photography. Although it's somewhat uneven, the exhibit is dominated by fairly strong work. It should help assure Guilford's current crop of art students that there can be artistic life after graduation.

Among the more senior Guilford alumni represented here is photographer David Spear (class of 1961). His two black-and-white images of Native American women in Mexico are highlights of the show. One is a striking portrait of a young woman with a pigeon or dove perched on her shoulder, and the other is a more mysterious, blurry-edged view of several women carrying lighted candles in some kind of ritual procession. These indicate an intriguing new direction in the work of a photographer best-known for his images of rural North Carolinians.

Andy Smith is also a photographer, but he graduated 30 years after Spear did. His two black-and-white photos are quieter and less dramatic than Spear's, but they, too, are strong and somewhat haunting pictures. Both are interior views of rooms in what appears to be an abandoned old school building, and despite the straightforward presentation, these images evoke the kinds of eerie, uneasily nostalgic feelings that one is likely to experience alone in such a setting.

Yet another photographer represented here is John Mottern (class of '83), whose work in this show is centered on social concerns. His color image, *Boy — Salvador*, is more than just a portrait. The subject, perhaps 9 or 10 years old, wears a hospital gown and sits with his back wedged into the corner of a tile-walled room that could be a jail cell or a hospital cubicle. His head has been shaved, which makes it easy to see the sewn-up gash across the top of his forehead, and he stares upward through wide eyes that appear to have seen far more suffering than a child should have to witness. Although we don't know exactly what has happened to him, it seems likely that he is one of the countless people in El Salvador who have been victimized by torture and political violence in recent years, and in that sense his suffering stands for the plight of all such people in his country and elsewhere.

Ed Penick ('83) scavenged photographic imagery from magazines to create his two collages here. One, an emblem of multi-ethnic-



WOOD-CUT: Susan Bleeker Freyberg's *The Homeless* will be on display at Guilford College.



STONEWARE: Molly Sawyer's *Cirrus*.

ity, shows a face that is part black and part white. Lest anyone miss the obvious message, Penick has titled it *We Are All Humans*. His other piece, *Double Take*, treats the less noble themes of speed and anonymous sex by juxtaposing a montage of bare body parts with a close-up of a motorcycle engine. Matthew Myers ('92) makes more effective use of collage techniques in his two small but striking mixed-media pieces, both of which center on photographic images of nude women. In *Modern Medusa Allegory*, the woman's face is blacked out so as to render her anonymous, and she is surrounded by free-floating painted images that refer to classical art and contemporary sexuality. As a student, Myers exhibited some strong work in the Piedmont Triad, and it's good to see that he is continuing to work at the same high level.

Among the exhibit's more noteworthy paintings are those of Bonnie Melton ('77), who combines elements of abstraction with references to landscape and other representational forms. Her large painting titled *Gardening in the South* looks like a magnified

cross section of a small patch of ground where several plants with oddly configured root systems are growing, pushing a few tentative shoots up out of the earth so that they stand out against the thin layer of blue sky at the top of the canvas.

On a similar scale but in a very different stylistic vein is *April 1995*, by Mary Edith Alexander ('85). A pale golden light suffuses the vast, sparsely furnished room depicted in this painting. In the most distant part of the room, a semitransparent sheet or curtain is draped over an indoor clothesline so that it veils an empty table and two empty chairs. Scattered over the floor between the table and the painting's foreground are playing cards whose empty box lies at the edge of a wall in the lower right. This painting gives you the sense that you've walked onto the set of a play whose ending you've just missed.

C.J. Hurley ('93) uses a pop-art style derived from comic-book imagery in his bizarrely amusing acrylic painting, *Give Me That, It's Mine*. At its center are two grotesque mutant humanoids — a man and a woman — fighting for control of a spotlight contraption that the woman holds so that it shines directly on the man's face. He has blue and purple skin and a penis growing from his chin, and he brandishes a revolver in his right hand. She has an extra head at the end of a long snakelike neck that sprouts from the top of the more normally positioned head between her shoulders. Their struggle takes place in a luridly colored urban landscape that is otherwise populated by prostitutes, topless dancers, a man on the verge of suicide, and a Buddha dangling by one arm from a strange platform that towers over everything else in the picture.

In a related vein is Hurley's drawing titled *The Synthetic Atmosphere*, which centers on another somewhat violent encounter between a man and a woman. This time, though, the man is unarmed, and the woman is a masked dominatrix wearing a scanty black (presumably leather) outfit and wielding a riding crop. The setting is a jumble of teetering Gothic buildings and monumental piles of junk. Hurley's scathing satires on contemporary relationships between men and women are reminiscent of S. Clay Wilson's comic strips from the late 1960s, and they're among the highlights of the exhibit.

Among the show's other highlights are assemblages by Jennifer McInnes ('87) and other three-dimensional pieces by Hea Crownfield ('94), P. Fred Williams ('95), Isabella Daniel ('77) and Molly Sawyer ('95).