



"Family Flying Kite" (top left) is one of Haley Hasler's many droll self-portraits. Jane Smaldone places her daughter in a landscape in "The Girl Who Loved Animals," (top right). Kay Ruane adds brilliant flares of warmth and color to her works, including "Playing With Fire."

# The self-portrait of a lady

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Portraiture — especially when the artist is depicting a family member — can be an act of love. Self-portraiture is more an act of scrutiny. For Haley Hasler, who has several self-portraits up at Alpha Gallery, it is also a playground for daydreams.

Imagine gazing at yourself in the mirror: Your eyes are tired. Your mouth is closed. Your expression is critical. Then picture yourself flying, arms and legs gracefully poised, like an angel descending. Only you have that same implacable look on your face. It's a funny picture, isn't it? Hasler specializes in such scenes; her images are hysterical. But there's more than a droll sense of humor at work. The canvases pop with pattern, detail, and tone.

Hasler last showed at Alpha in 2004, and these new paintings are technically crisper and more fleshed out. Landscapes unfurl behind her, as in "Family Flying Kite." A bird-shaped kite hovers above, and her young son trails her through the sunset sky like a kite tail, while a man in the dusky foreground watches.

Playing dress-up is part of the fun; a yellow ruffle reappears in several paintings, sometimes as a tutu, sometimes as an Elizabethan collar. It sits around her waist in "Mary and Catherine at the Circus," a double self-portrait referencing two saints (one, like Mary, holds a baby; the other, like Catherine, has a wheel or hoop). Hasler loads the painting with detail: She dresses Mary in stripes, polka dots, and ruffles; behind the pair, striped curtains part to reveal horses and other performers; a cat in a purple outfit threatens to jump through Catherine's hoop.

In all these paintings, Hasler wears a calm but weary expression that verges on the deadpan. It's the still point around which her daffy narratives spiral. She looks

## Haley Hasler: New Paintings

At: Alpha Gallery, 38 Newbury St., through Jan. 3. 617-536-4465. alphagallery.com

## Jane Smaldone: New Work and Sachiko Akiyama: New Sculpture

At: Nielsen Gallery, 179 Newbury St., through Jan. 13. 617-266-4835. niensengallery.com

## Kay Ruane: Personal Space

At: Miller Block Gallery, 14 Newbury St., through Jan. 9. 617-536-4650. millerblockgallery.com

frankly at the viewer and seems to ask, "How did I get myself into this pickle?" Most of us will relate.

## Family bonds

Jane Smaldone's paintings of her daughter are on view at the Nielsen Gallery. Smaldone has been making portraits of Isabel since she adopted her in China 11 years ago, and it's been a delight to watch Isabel grow through her mother's eyes.

There's a precision and softness about these portraits. Although some have traditional setups, the artist is beginning to place her subject in the landscape. "The Girl who Loved Animals" shows Isabel stepping barefoot on winter-barren ground as a rabbit, turtle, and ladybug gather around her. She holds her skirt up in a way that recalls the princess in Velazquez's "Las Meninas." Smaldone's technical expertise dances over the skirt. She brushes paint on, presses and stamps it, creating a shimmering translucence.

Sculptor Sachiko Akiyama makes a nice pairing with Smaldone at Nielsen. The porcelain delicacy of Smaldone's canvases complements Akiyama's bulky bass-wood-carved and painted portraits and self-portraits. The artist's parents are Japanese, and most of the people she portrays are family members. Her sculptures capture an outward empha-

sis on correctness, but hint at deep bonds and rich internal lives.

Her process, chipping away tiny bits of wood, is painstaking. A large piece such as "Alone Together," in which the sculptor and her sister are carved from a single block of wood, can take months to complete. The women on a bench look away from each other, but they hold hands; it's a quiet, poignant evocation of sisterhood.

## Touched with color

Another self-portraitist, Kay Ruane, is showing at Miller Block. Ruane uses herself (and sometimes a second woman) to suggest Everywoman. We never see the faces of the women in the drawings; only their graceful backs, which seem to direct us to the scenes around them; the detailed interiors open out into distant landscapes. Ruane is navigating the territory between interior and exterior, between self and world.

The sheer detail Ruane evokes with graphite is marvel enough, but she adds tiny bits of color with care and wit. "Crowned" has her kneeling on a pillow looking out the window. Nearby are splashes of bright color: flowers, a wine-glass, a portrait of a queen, a stained-glass image of a knight. The jewelry Ruane wears glitters with rubies and sapphires.

The colors suggest a much slower passage from black-and-white to Technicolor than Dorothy experienced when arriving in Oz. The figure always seems to be trapped, looking out at the world; there's longing and distance to these scenes. A series of drawings, "Playing With Fire," has Ruane in scarlet high heels — they're visual lightning rods — gazing out the window at distant warmth: a volcano spitting lava, a backyard grill. I don't know that Ruane should ever go all-Technicolor; the tension between her scraps of hot color and the gray ice of the rest of her drawings is too intriguing.