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Dead Baroque

By Roberta Fallon

Gian Lorenzo Bernini's heirs are alive and well and working hard in Philadelphia. Artists like Christopher Davison at Jaskey/Tower and Hunter Stabler at Pageant Soloveev--each in their own way and both with contemporary techniques and subject matter--express the same high emotional content, drama and dark beauty as the great 17th-century practitioner of twist, swirl and angst.

Hallmarks of the baroque are exquisite craftsmanship, ornate patterning, obsessive attention to detail and ecstatic (or at least thrilling) subjects. Stabler and Davison make work just like that: obsessive, beautifully crafted and on the subject of death, suffering and the unknown.

Both artists dip into spiritual waters, but if anything the works are anti-religion. Stabler's images of skulls, pentagrams, goats' heads and mandalas ride the coattails of wiccan and Eastern philosophies. Davison's use of witches, demons, ghostly afterimages, saintly haloes and apocalyptic story-telling is right out of the Book of Revelation.

Davison is the riskier of the two artists. His darkly handsome works channel the unconscious mind with figures in groups or singularly set in nightmarish scenes often tinged with weird humor. Frequently (although not in this show) the figure's genitals are exposed although the person is otherwise clothed, like the classic dream of appearing in public without your pants on.

There's a large streak of violence or implied violence in the works, which feel like tableaux from Greek tragedies. *Woman and Child Summoning Demon*, a work that mimics Madonna-and-child paintings, shows a severed head (the demon) barely visible on the black-painted background. The story could be personal or symbolic and universal. Either way the piece is dark, sad and full of unease.

Davison's people seem like deer in the headlights. Their blank, open eyes stare vacantly although their actions belie an apparent lack of motivation. *Girl Burning Fuel*, a quirky diptych, shows a girl with a halo holding a decorated vase that's belching flames and smoke before a Van Gogh-turgid background. The theme may be eco-disaster or burning down Mom's house. It's a scary image.

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Davison's technique is a combination of delicate mark-making (his patterning is great) and brute force. His tools are pens, inks, pencils and scissors. He cuts out and collages images from one work onto another with no attempt to make a seamless match. For this artist, the world (and the unseen dream world) exist seamlessly, and things float in and out of consciousness just as they float in and out of his works.

Where Davison's works smolder, Stabler's works float in an aura of gorgeousness. The artist is a cut-paper virtuoso and an ink-on-paper wizard with the design sense of a medieval manuscript monk. He loves curlicues, rosettes and repeat patterns.

The works are quirky and dark with a dash of play and youthfulness. *Hare Christmas Maharishi*, a new ink-on-paper piece with a white filagree skull set in a swirling background, is almost nuclear in its explosiveness. It's the most awe-inspiring and theatrical of this very dramatic body of new work. Like the other works in the show, *Maharishi* feels like a kind of Beatles' mashup of East and West--part serious, part Jabbawokey.

Pageant Gallery owner Daniel Dalseth told me it took the artist two months to make the Maharishi piece. The ornate labor-intensive work--not white ink on black paper but black ink in the negative spaces and the white of the paper showing through--is a knockout. The artist told me he's resting his arm at the moment after its vigorous workout for this show.

Baroque art was commissioned mostly by the church and intended for public consumption. These idiosyncratic self-propelled works are also intended for a public audience. Neither of these young artists (Davison: Tyler M.F.A. 2006; Stabler: Penn M.F.A. 2006) is wagging a finger at the world and crying "Woe is me," but with their dark motifs and dramatic in-your-face moments, they are questioning the status quo and definitely proposing that things aren't as cheery and lovely as they may seem.