



# Figurative Paintings by Sherri Wolfgang Explore Body Image at Housatonic Museum of Art

July 10, 2017

by Susan Hodara

BRIDGEPORT, CT – A graceful male dancer in an array of choreographic poses; giddy, half-naked women marred and scarred by cosmetic surgery; a handsome young couple with festive attire but concerned expressions. These are the characters that comprise “Sherri Wolfgang: SOLO,” an exhibition of 23 oil paintings filling the Burt Chernow Galleries at the [Housatonic Museum of Art](#).

The show, [Wolfgang’s](#) first museum survey, spans five years and three bodies of work: all figurative, all life-size, all dramatic.

“SOLO” opens with the dancer, the lone subject of Wolfgang’s series of 12 portraits, “Nick.e.lo.de.on.” Muscles taut, he arches his torso and thrusts his limbs with agility and power. In all but one of the paintings, the figure is set against a black background, bathed in an amber spotlight, sometimes just a toe or heel anchoring him to the earth. In the final work, he is aloft, leaping in glory against billowing clouds.



“Nick 12” by Sherri Wolfgang, 2017. Oil on canvas, 72 x 96 inches. Courtesy of the Housatonic Museum of Art.

“Nick.e.lo.de.on” takes its name not only from its model (the young dancer Nick Daley), but from the flickering images of early nickelodeon movies. Each painting is like a single frame of a dancer in motion, a celebration of the majesty of the human body. While “Nick.e.lo.de.on” pays homage to physical perfection, the body’s imperfections were the source for Wolfgang’s “Twisted” series, a courageous examination of women’s growing obsession with cosmetic surgery and its often dreadful results. In this gallery, the subjects bear the traces of tummy tucks and face lifts.

A woman’s engorged crimson lips form a freakish grin in *I’m Ready for my Closeup*. In *Lunching in Westport*, three women gather around a table in a sun-filled kitchen, scarcely clothed, wine glasses in hand. White bandages blind one of them and cover another’s breast and belly. The third, her scalp bald from too many hair extensions, sports stitches across her body.



“Lunching in Westport” by Sherri Wolfgang, 2014. Oil on canvas, 60 x 60 inches.  
Courtesy of the Housatonic Museum of Art.

The only man in “Twisted,” in the painting *She Got Off in Greenwich*, embodies a disquieting perspective on the “male gaze.” Neatly dressed, he sits alone, head down, peering at a breast. It is detached, pink and pert, with a cluster of staples around the areola. The man holds it close with both hands, peering salaciously at its protruding nipple, which nearly touches his beaky nose.



“She Got Off in Greenwich” by Sherri Wolfgang, 2012. Oil on canvas, 36 x 60 inches. Courtesy of the Housatonic Museum of Art.

Wolfgang, who has lived and worked in Westport, Connecticut, for 25 years, began her career as a commercial illustrator and co-founder of the award-winning Dynamic Duo Studio. Having spent the last decade mining her roots as a classically trained figurative painter, she describes herself as a “Contemporary Renaissance artist,” incorporating the aesthetics and craftsmanship of the Old Masters with the ethos of 21st-century culture.

For “Twisted,” Wolfgang chose to portray her modern-day subject matter using the distortions of 16th-century Mannerism, and served as her own model. To create *Is This God’s Plan?* and *Is This God’s Plan? II*, she enlisted the help of a plastic surgeon. The paintings present front and back views of her nude body scrawled with the doctor’s diagrams for multiple alterations. “I stood before him and said, ‘Mark me up like I’m your canvas,’” she recalled.

When “SOLO” closes, *Is This God’s Plan? II* will be added to the more than 6,000 objects that form the collection at the Housatonic Museum, which is located on the campus of Housatonic Community College in Bridgeport, C.T. The collection was established in 1967 by the museum’s director emeritus Burt Chernow, for whom the changing exhibition galleries were named. Many works from the collection, which includes pieces by the likes of [Pablo Picasso](#), [Henri Matisse](#), [Joan Miró](#), [Auguste Rodin](#) and [Cindy Sherman](#), are displayed throughout the campus.

Robbin Zella, the museum’s director for 19 years, noted that despite the stark visual contrasts between “Twisted” and “Nick.e.lo.de.on,” both bodies of work share a common thread. “Nick.e.lo.de.on” illuminates the body’s beauty; “Twisted” considers the desperate drive to fight that beauty’s deterioration. Underlying both, Zella suggested, is the concept of youth.

“Both series hinge on that idea,” she said on a recent morning in the galleries. “Whether you’re a dancer or a trophy wife, your career is predicated on preserving your looks, on being in top physical form. And your career is over before you know it.”

Wolfgang’s fascination with youth continues in her newest body of work, “American Pathos,” which tackles the complex plight of the millennial generation. “SOLO” contains a single painting from this series. In the piece, titled *The Prom(ise)*, a young couple sits on a table draped with an ornately patterned tapestry. He is dressed in black, she in a pearly fringed dress, her dark hair framing a pale face with rosy cheeks and ruby lips. Both stare sternly, piercingly, at the viewer.



“The Prom(ise)” by Sherri Wolfgang, 2017. Oil on canvas, 60 x 70 inches. 1st in the American Pathos series. Courtesy of the Housatonic Museum of Art.

Like the works in “Twisted,” *The Prom(ise)* holds compelling narrative possibilities. Stylistically, the composition evokes the Renaissance, with its golden backlight, textured fabrics and sensuous lemons and oranges. Yet the pair is distinctly 21st-century: he has a nose ring, she wears multiple earrings, ballet flats and black nail polish. One of her feet tilts up toward the other in the gesture of an awkward girl just barely a woman.

*The Prom(ise)* reflects the paralyzing anxiety prevalent in a generation struggling to find its identity. “This is one of the most sophisticated, best educated generations to come into adulthood,” Zella said, “and yet there is no place for them in our society.”

From unsettling to inspiring, horrifying to droll, Wolfgang’s paintings offer much to ponder, thematically as well as technically. “This is an artist,” Zella said, “playing with a lot of different ways to make a statement and tell a story through paint.”

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**BASIC FACTS:** “Sherri Wolfgang: SOLO” is on view June 15 through July 31, 2017 in the Burt Chernow Galleries at the Housatonic Museum of Art, on the campus of Housatonic Community College, 900 Lafayette Boulevard, Bridgeport, CT 06604. A gallery talk, “Coffee and Conversation with Artist Sherri Wolfgang,” will take place July 12 at 1 p.m. More info at: [www2.housatonic.edu/artmuseum](http://www2.housatonic.edu/artmuseum)

NOTE: Reporter Susan Hodara also wrote the essay for the “Sherri Wolfgang: SOLO” exhibition brochure.