

Artist puts new twist on historic references

By Charles Desmarais

There is a trend lately toward art exhibitions spread across two venues. The exhaustive Suzanne Lacy exhibition that runs through Aug. 4 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts focuses on two aspects of the artist's wide-ranging political activism, while entertaining Viola Frey shows contrasted her self-portraits at Marin Museum of Contemporary Art (now closed) with a wider range of work at di Rosa Center for Contemporary Art (through Dec. 29).

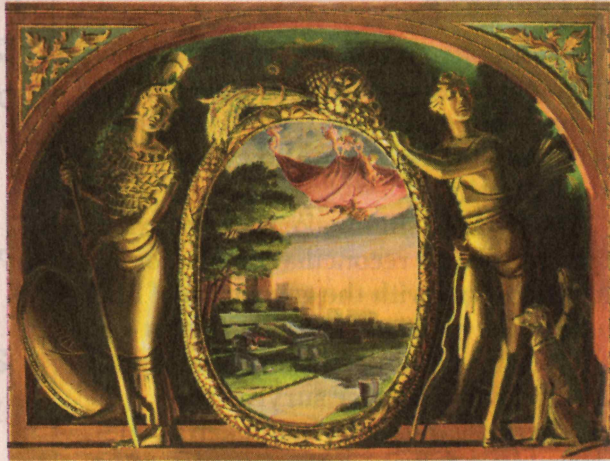
The trend continues with two exhibitions of the work of M. Louise Stanley, one of the most entertaining figurative artists at work in the Bay Area today. These shows, on display at the Kala Art Gallery in Berkeley and the Richmond Art Center, comprise a fine retrospective of Stanley's work.

At Kala, large-scale canvases recall what art historians call "history paintings" — huge pictures with elaborately coded narratives — and fill a sizable gallery. The show in Richmond, meanwhile, is intimate, both in

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M. Louise Stanley



Kala Art Institute

"Pages 64-65 from Sketchbook 30" is among M. Louise Stanley's works at the Richmond Art Center.

Stanley references the classics in works like "20th Century Genre," which is on view in Berkeley.

Dual shows make old themes new

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scale and content, with 20 or more overflowing sketchbooks shown among works on canvas and paper hung on the walls.

Counterintuitively, perhaps, the Richmond exhibition is the more engaging of the two. Stanley has an antic intelligence and a loose style that works best at small scale, the way comic books and graphic novels do.

She is at her best when humorously sending up classical subjects

and Old Master concerns. Her delicious imagined meeting of Catholic martyrs displaying plucked and severed body parts mocks Renaissance paintings of bloody Saints Agatha, Lucia and others. Blowing them up to grand scale adds little but bombast, which may well be the point.

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<http://bit.ly/ArtguyReviews>

"Ovid Redux: M. Louise Stanley Paints the Classics": Noon-5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; noon-4:30 p.m. Saturday. Through Saturday, May 18. Free. Kala Art Gallery, 2990 San Pablo Ave., Berkeley. 510-841-7000. www.kala.org

"Faces Without Noses: The Visual Laboratory of M. Louise Stanley": 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Through Friday, May 17. Free. Richmond Art Center, 2540 Barrett Ave., Richmond. 510-620-6772. www.richmondartcenter.org