



Striking Oil

Recalling the Old Masters, Donley's richly provocative paintings whisper 'mysteries' of violence and sex | *By Peter Barnes* |

A person staring, rather dazed, at the naked women and other provocative subjects looking back at him from artist Ray Donley's oily shadows might feel a bit as if Rembrandt just whacked him on the head with a palette. Which is sort of the point.

"When I began to study it in depth, I realized this kind of portraiture has the power to penetrate the psychology of the sitter," says Donley, who brings his rare combination of Baroque style and contemporary edge to Laura Rathe Fine Art (2707 Colquitt St., 713.527.7700) May 1-29. The Old Masters, he says, "were doing something that I felt could be exploited on a deeper level. That is, the psychological resonance of a painting, of a face, that you're confronted with."

Collected across the U.S. and Europe, Donley makes his pieces from a workspace behind the Austin home he's long shared with his wife Sharon and a once-feral cat in a tree-shaded neighborhood just off the UT campus. Simply painting bodies and faces comes easy; what makes the work difficult, he says, is creating a figure that can tell a story that evolves with every person who sees it.

Donley uses models occasionally, but he conjures most of his subjects from his imagination. He starts with faces and adds in subtle body



RAY OF DARK Austin-based artist Ray Donley shows oil paintings such as 'The Encounter' and, far above, 'Figure With Cat Mask' at Houston's Laura Rathe Fine Art May 1-29. 'This kind of portraiture,' he says, 'has the power to penetrate the psychology of the sitter.'

language in the eyes and mouths, telling a story. The resulting paintings include a gauzy remix of the Last Supper with a bare-breasted Mary Magdalene in Jesus' seat and Judas rendered as a self-portrait; exquisitely detailed figures that would look at home beside portraits of aristocracy in an Amsterdam museum; and a sketch of a hooded woman, naked, with her arms bound together.

"It touches on the sexual urge, which is

as primitive as you can get," says the artist. "It touches on violence, but it also touches on what I hope are the mysteries of life."

Visitors to his new exhibit, *The Lavish and Squalor Years*—a nod to the feast-or-famine realities of creative life—can expect a bit of everything. The 59-year-old artist fills the multi-story space at Rathe with a bevy of new pieces, as well as work from the last 30 years. It's a semi-retrospective that goes back to his UT days in the late 1970s, when most artists were gravitating toward conceptual art. At the time, no one seemed to get why Donley wanted to make his statement in very-old-school oil.

"I quit the art studio program very, very frustrated and decided to get an academic degree in art history," he says. "And it turns out it couldn't have worked better." Donley went on to earn his master's studying the evolution of art, contrasting the paint handling and technique that distinguished the paintings of Velázquez from those of Caravaggio or Rembrandt, in the process creating a style all his own.

"It can be very, very dark," Donley says of his work. "It can be kind of jarring. But I need to be an expressive artist. I want to say something that's very profoundly individual, but at the same time might resonate on a universal level." ■