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'Reinventing' the portrait at MSU's Broad Museum

Emerging artist Hope Gangloff's exhibit on display through Dec. 1

Hope Gangloff had been across the street, rummaging through posters on the upper floor of Curious Book Shop. It was preparation. The mural she was about to paint on the slanted 30-foot-high wall of the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum's main gallery would be a collage of posters.

"It's not going to be trompe l'oeil, because it's going to look too graphic and flat," Gangloff said. She was holding a printout of a 1990s concert poster, Sebadoh at the Lounge Ax, the bygone Chicago rock club. "But I love well-placed typographies. I think it's a really great lost art form, so when I see it I really love it and I love to use it."

This was Wednesday. Around her, staff from the museum were framing and hanging portraits, both the larger-than-

life paintings Gangloff does of her friends in New York and older works pulled from the collection that the Broad inherited from its predecessor. The exhibit, the first in a series called "The Genres," would open on Friday.

"If you think about the history of Western art, there are three basic genres that artists had to contend with: portraiture, landscape and still life," said curator Alison Gass. She's building the exhibits around artists who have "reinvented the tradition of each of those three."

Gangloff paints in a style that evokes artists of the 19th century.

"The thick application of the paint, the green and yellow undertones in the skin and in the faces, to me they feel like they're coming from Matisse, from Van Gogh, from Degas," Gass said.

Her subjects are of the moment, stylish in an art crowd sort of way, hip.

"If you were living in Brooklyn in the early 2000s, you would recognize these, a certain style of trucker hat and Converse Chucks. These are social cues we know how to read because we live at the same time as these people do," Gass said.

She likes the way it foregrounds everything most observers miss in the older paintings.

"We don't know how to read those social cues," she said, standing in front of an 1820's portrait of Mrs. Ephraim Baldwin, married to one of the designers of Erie Canal, wearing a ribboned and ruffled bonnet. "They just look old fashioned to us."

Gangloff is tall, blue eyed. She paints portraits because "it's the way that I socialize. People come up, hang out with me for a couple of hours, couple of days. We catch up. It's really nice. And I love looking at people."

Her subjects are her friends: artists, writers, designers, one actress. She gravitates toward extreme features, big noses, big feet (“The small noses and pretty eyes, it’s hard to see them.”) She paints them half-again life sized.

“They’re all watching movies. Every last one of them,” she said, and turned to Donald Stahl, a friend who had accompanied her to Michigan and whose portrait will be part of the exhibit. “You watched ‘Game of Thrones,’” she reminded him.

“And then I switched down to ‘Eastbound & Down,’” Stahl said, “and you noticed that it probably would have been better for me to watch the comedy because it my face lightened up a bit.”

The act of painting becomes a gesture of friendship, Gangloff said. “It’s like, this is how much I love you.”

The idea for the exhibit was to turn the gallery into something like a 19th century Parisian salon with paintings hung high on the walls, love seats in the center, that mural of posters.

Gangloff worked on finding the furniture, on picking other portraits from the museum’s collection. Gass had intended to hang the two sets of works separately. Gangloff decided to mix them.

“The styles of painting that are in here aren’t styles that I could do or would want to, but it’s not competition,” she said.

“If you have a whole bunch of things in the room that are bright, it just increases the room’s brightness.”