

New faces of portraiture

Face fit

Where: Newark Museum, 49 Washington Street, Newark.

When: Through June 28. Gallery hours are noon-5 p.m. Wednesday-Sunday

Tickets: Free. Call (973) 596-8550

By Dan Bischoff

STAR-LEDGER STAFF

It's been fashionable for a hundred years for an artist to say he despises portraiture. One of the very best American portrait painters, John Singer Sargent, set up a low moan about how he hated the thing that had made him famous almost as soon as it did. He used to refer to portraits as "heads," as in, "I'll have to go back and punch out a few heads to pay for my travel."

What makes portraits so onerous, of course, is the indisputable fact that everyone's a critic. A person may not know a pompon from a palette knife, but he can say, "Who's that supposed to be?" with complete aplomb and be perfectly right.

Getting a likeness, as they say, is only the start of the problem for contemporary artists. The Newark Museum has mounted a small show curated by Hoboken artist/art bar owner Joe Borzotta that samples five different artists (including Borzotta himself), all of whom take a different tack on portrait painting. It's a fun show.

It's fun in part because, like everybody else these days, Borzotta can't pretend to know what's hot — everything's hot, if it works. So he begins with Loretta Keilar, a contemporary portraitist who works in a slimmed-down Sargent-ish way. Keilar gives the air of always getting a flattering likeness.

Her "Maria," a formal portrait of a young woman in slacks relaxing on a French-looking loveseat, old-gold picture frames leaning against the wall behind her, is exactly what we mean by getting your portrait done in

oils. Disciplined paint, as believable as a photo (though Keilar insists on working from life), the artist's works display a convincing, solidly structured realism.

Next comes a cluster of plywood disks, just about the diameter of a barstool, each painted with an exact reproduction of a Polaroid snapshot, centered exactly on the panel. Each imitation Polaroid — you don't often get to see oils so flagrantly imitating photos — carries a subtly expressionistic portrait of some anonymous New Yorker sitting at a bar.

In these works, Diana Jensen says, she's "exploring the 'lounge culture' in New York City," where she's made ends meet for the last five years by tending bar. These are her patrons. Cheers — they are, in many ways, the most engaging pieces in the show.

On the opposite gallery is a row of notebook pages, each of which carries the first name of a blazoned acronym, as if meant for soap. Emiko Shimoc artist who ta friends, neight the street, then up small paint in a sort of Al balls. She's do have 30, all pus

Every one is clearly recoo smiling. Big, fri nled by twinklis

It's creepy. "The point different ways sically represer portrait," says gathering work and a half agt through the vo City Without W town Newark emerging New

Borzotta mentions Yoshio Itagaki's work, saying, "I wanted to include (it) because, although it's done with a computer, there are definitely painterly qualities to each print."

Itagaki has morphed the face of someone named Sara onto Fritz the cat and onto a figure I don't recognize from Japanese anime, the sci-fi cartoons that are daily fare in that culture. There are also two Buddhist statues whose forms have been simplarily digitized and played with.

Borzotta himself has four oil portraits on canvas and one on a computer monitor in the show, painted with a vigorous realism set against mass-market blocks of pure color — chrome yellow, nasty milky red, whatever. One is a "Self-portrait as a Pez Dispenser," which we've seen before and still enjoy in this context. And there's "Thinking of Jesus," a portrait



Chris, one of bartender Diana Jensen's engaging imitation Polaroid portraits of New York bar patrons, is on view at the Newark Museum.

MAY 24, 1998