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HEADS at Dolby Chadwick Gallery

By Kenneth Baker
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“Heads” minus tales: Art historian and museum director emeritus Peter Selz, now in his 90s, has a longer view than most of what has persisted and what has expired in the art of several generations past. So his choice of “Heads” as the theme of the show he assembled for Dolby Chadwick warrants serious reflection.

Significantly, Selz sidelines the notion of portraiture, although several things on view announce themselves as portraits or self-portraits. “Heads” encompasses both living and dead, portrait and mask, individual and symbol.

Jim Morphesis’ big-fisted painting of a skull emerges as the show’s emblematic work. As a memento mori, it flirts with cliché, but with its title, “For Miguel de Unamuno II” (1985), Morphesis invokes the Basque writer whose “tragic sense of life” entails a striving for rational truth burdened by awareness of existence as a finally baffling and merciless situation.

Something of that existentialist bleakness pervades the show, as if Selz feels that contemporary art or its audience needs shaking awake from some funk of denial.



Jim Morphesis *For Miguel De Unamuno II* (1985), 53” x 43”
oil, magna, charcoal, pastel and collage on paper
Courtesy of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Why do we not always see full-face portraiture as beheading, as Nathan Oliveira's late bronze "Masks" mischievously encourage? Does the face or some other aspect of the head enable it to betoken a whole individual as, say, a foot or a knee cannot?

Or does the quality of scrutiny, the creative scruple an artwork registers matter most, as two Lucian Freud prints here suggest?

"Heads" does not answer such questions. Perhaps no exhibition could. But by dramatic contrasts in style - among Gottfried Helnwein, Sherie Franssen, Alex Kanevsky and others - it reopens them in lively fashion.