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HOW TO BE COOL IN A CITY FULL OF DOUCHEBAGS 38

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Body Building

Deborah Brisker Burk finds function in the human form.

By Maura Judkis

Growing up, Deborah Brisker Burk was terrified of a print of Manet's *The Dead Toreador* that hung above her bed in Cleveland Park. Without it, though, she wouldn't be the artist she is today. Between the ages of 7 and 10, she'd often wake up to see the dead bullfighter "staring down at me," she says. "In the beginning, I was frightened by the image, but as time went by, it became reassuring," especially, she says, after seeing the real thing at the National Gallery of Art. "I was drawn to the composition and the intense, dark feeling...I know it was an early and important influence."

Thanks in part to that painting, Burk, 57, has built a career out of portraying the human form, and it's the focus of her latest show, "Concerning the Figure," at Parish Gallery. Burk, who now lives in Potomac, spent Sunday afternoons during her childhood at the National Gallery and Phillips Collection with her sister, Joan, who also became a painter. "I was an incessant doodler," says Burk. "I drew everywhere—restaurants, home, the theater, and at the galleries...here and abroad." She stayed in town for school, attending George Washing-

ton University for her bachelor's and master's degrees in fine art, and experimenting with different art forms from sculpture to lithography to landscape painting.

Eventually, though, landscapes stopped doing much for her. So in 1995, after 12 years of still-life paintings, she returned to one of the most tried-and-true art school rituals: painting live nude models. Most of her works depict the female form, though she's not making an explicit statement on feminism or femininity. Women, she says, "just have more curves—more lines, more exploration."

That exploration is less plotted out and more stream-of-consciousness. "Space, how the figure emerges, and line are very important to me," she says. "The figure is a jumping-off point." The intuitive approach sometimes generates a few surprises. While working on one painting, *Reinvention*, a second figure began to appear; in the finished piece, the forms of two women are visible within fields of abstract color and grainy, textured paint. "An alter-ego emerged unexpectedly," she says. "It was another discovery process, the emergence of an unexpected being." As in many of Burk's works, her figures are out-

lined in a thick black stroke—a technique that evokes Manet, though she also lists Matisse, Degas, Rauschenberg, and Richter among her influences.

The Parish Gallery is a somewhat unusual host for Burk's work. The gallery focuses on African artists and subject matter, but Europe, not Africa, is where Burk has traveled for her art. Regardless, she and gallery owner Norman Parish "had an almost instant connection," she says. "He got my art, my line, and my use of color. I also don't paint the figure with real or natural skin colors, so to me, my figures are not any specific race but figures that anyone of any race can relate to."

"The gallery's primary focus is the African diaspora, but it always represents the



Anatomically Direct: Burk's recent paintings focus exclusively on women.

same type of feeling," says Parish. "Debbie is one of the artists that fit what we do here." He shrugs. "They have to have a soul to get in here, a good soul."

"Concerning the Figure" runs to Jan. 16 at Parish Gallery, 1054 31st St. NW; call (202) 944-2310.