

melancholy WOMEN

Three West Loop art shows
explore the anxieties of romance

BY KEVIN NANCE

Art Critic

As Tammy Wynette reminded us, sometimes it's hard to be a woman — especially if there's a man around. Or if he's not. Either way, it's fertile ground in contemporary figurative art, as three terrific new shows now in galleries in Chicago's West Loop (Laura Mosquera at moniquemeloche, Wonsook Kim at the Thomas McCormick Gallery and Robert Colescott at the G.R. N'Namdi Gallery) amply demonstrate. In their own very different ways, these artists explore the troubled psyches of women in relation to the presence or absence of men — not the most politically correct of topics, perhaps, and just as well; they pull at you with the potent undertow of romantic melancholy.

That pull is most harrowing in Mosquera's "in the deep end," an exquisite series of drawings in colored pencil and graphite that amount to a searing portrait of love's pathos: risk of rejection, acceptance of entanglement, jealousy and obsession, and, in the series' poignant climax ("...again"), devastating loss. Mosquera, a Guatemalan who lives in Chicago, is a subtle, sensitive colorist with an eye for decoration — she's learned a thing or two from the Fauvists, especially Matisse — and a flair for off-balance compositions that seem borrowed from independent art cinema.

But the connection to the movies extends to her keen sense of high drama, which, pushed along by on-the-nose titles such as "I Want Something More" and "All There Is Is You," flirts with melodrama. Unlike, say, Roy Lichtenstein's thought balloons, there's no sense of irony in the titles, even though they can sound like the names of the "women's pictures" of Douglas Sirk. (If that sounds condescending, remember that Sirk was one of the few Hollywood directors of the mid-20th century who treated women seriously — he showed them *thinking*, which is what Mosquera's women, locked in perpetual dialogue with themselves, do just as much as *feeling*. There is an intelligent suffering.)

Kim's women, in "Loves of Outsiders," are of a different time and place — the 500-year Chosun dynasty of Korea, which ended in 1910 — but their predicament is as symbolically up to date as Mosquera's. Courtesans trained to serve as intellectual and sexual companions to the

ART REVIEW

LAURA MOSQUERA: 'IN THE DEEP END'

When: Through Oct. 14

Where: moniquemeloche,
118 N. Peoria

Call: (312) 445-0299

WONSOOK KIM: 'LOVES OF OUTSIDERS'

When: Through Oct. 14

Where: Thomas McCormick
Gallery, 835 W. Washington

Call: (312) 226-6800

ROBERT COLESCOTT: CHARCOAL DRAWINGS

When: Through Oct. 14

Where: G.R. N'Namdi Gallery,
110 N. Peoria

Call: (312) 563-9240

male elite, the "kisaeng" were highly educated, and therefore more than smart enough to appreciate the tragic dimensions of their lives: excluded from respectability and family life, forced into facsimiles of love, longing for the real thing.

They want something more: genuine human connection and, its offshoot, a home in the world. In these images — mournful figurinelike sculptures, large acrylic canvases so thinly painted that they feel like watercolors and a series of oils on small wood panels shaped like what might be houses, complete with overhanging eaves — the courtesans live, breathe and dream the idea of true love, even as they recognize they can never have it. The result is poetic, seductive and ineffably sad. (In one of the oil panels, "My Boat," a woman casts off into a moonlit sea in a crude skiff that remains tethered to a tree.)

It might seem strange, in this context, to include the work of Colescott, whose selection of charcoal drawings from the 1980s is at first blush a merry bunch. Several of his women — the seemingly happy hooker with abundant and oh-so-rippling flesh of "Hi Sailor," the hosiery-removing temptress of "Stripper" — are both lush and louche, rendered in a loop-



"...again" (2006), a color pencil drawing by Laura Mosquera, is "in the deep end" at moniquemeloche.



"Waiting" (1986), a charcoal drawing by Robert Colescott, is at the G.R. N'Namdi Gallery through Oct. 14.



"My Boat" (2006), an oil on wood panel by Wonsook Kim, is part of "Loves of Outsiders" at Thomas McCormick Gallery.

ing freehand that's both improvisational and precise, like tightly controlled jazz. But aren't prostitutes and strippers close cousins to Kim's courtesans? Isn't it possible to glimpse, in the blotchy planes of

their faces, a dark knowledge behind the fun? And what are we to make of the pensive woman in "Waiting," lounging with a certain resignation next to her smoking (and possibly Caucasian) lover? The cigarette sug-

gests a post-coital moment, but if so, what preceded it doesn't seem to have hit the spot. If not — if what she's waiting for is yet to come — you give them two weeks, tops.

knance@suntimes.com