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Techno-struggles at Simone DeSousa

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If you've got the winter blues, a quick visit to Midtown's Simone DeSousa Gallery might just be the ticket.

The huge pictures in "Truing," the show by performative photographer Melanie Manos up through Feb. 23, are bright and funny enough to pop you out of any low-grade depression.

Look at them for a while, however, and these portraits start to look deeply unsettling.

In each shot, the artist — who appears in all the images — struggles against metal stepladders that appear animate and malevolent, a bit, if you will, like the apple trees in "Wizard of Oz."

In some frames, such as "In which F experiences rock-and-a-hard-place," the artist tries, clearly in vain, to scale a crevice between two sets of ladders pressing hard against her.

Even more alarming is "In which F plays dead," where we find the young woman slumped, limbs akimbo, over the top of a sharply tilted stepladder.

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It's not hard to read these portraits as apprehensive comments on the individual's place in our increasingly mechanized, technological world. But what immunizes the series from any risk of feeling pat or obvious is its subversive humor, which momentarily throws us off the hunt for deeper meaning.



"In which F plays dead" by Melanie Manos, in "Truing" at Simone DeSousa Gallery through Feb. 23. (Photo 11: Michael H. Hodges / Detroit News)

"Melanie always talks about pretty serious social and political situations," said gallery director and owner Simone DeSousa, "but there's always an aspect of humor which I think makes people feel welcome. Then they go through the layers."

Charlie Chaplin, who famously battled similar forces in "Modern Times," would doubtless be amused, and struck by the artist's perseverance in the face of sobering odds.

But there's added edge here, in that stepladders have a mostly masculine association, the inevitable tool of professional house painters.

DeSousa described Manos, who teaches at the University of Michigan Penny W. Stamps School of Art & Design, "as this petite, completely fearless woman." All the same, she added, "this particular body of work is definitely connected to power dynamics and gender bias."

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