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DRAWING THE FAUN: here Aida Laleian looks as if she were sinking into molten marble.

Bold and shy

Domingo Barreres and Aida Laleian

BY CHRISTOPHER MILLIS When an artist decides that his or her work should occupy six-foot-square frames or a cavernous atrium or a place on the Commonwealth Avenue

mall, it's a declaration of a kind of sociability — extroversion, for lack of a better word. On the other hand, the artist who works in a confined space or creates five-minute-long films makes a more introverted declaration. Among the many ironies of the intriguing new show at the Howard Yezerski Gallery is that the scale on which the two artists work looks as if it ought to be reversed.

The contemplative, personal nature of Domingo Barreres's art argues for a far more modest scale than his huge frames deliver; Aida Laleian, on the other hand, makes multimedia pieces whose spiritual scale registers as gigantic; yet the work itself invariably measures less than a foot square. The guy who ought to be more modest comes on big; the gal who ought to be more grandiose comes on small.

There's a hagiographic quality to Domingo Barreres's oversized painted portraits, in which identifiable and idealized figures — Queen Elizabeth, Federico García Lorca — float against backdrops of washes of deep and polished blue. With their lush, romantic colors, their stylized realism, and their commemorative, almost religious appeal, these are decidedly un-American paintings. Barreres himself is Spanish-born, but you do not need to know that to sense an aesthetic sensibility unlike that of an Anglo American.

For one thing, in all his portraits, sexuality is integrated with and subsumed by personality — as opposed to the American tendency to regard sexuality as a force independent of its host. Queen Elizabeth's head floats above her lace collar, as stationary, stately, and preserved as a Damien Hirst animal. The facial muscles command, but the eyes twinkle. García Lorca looks as if he'd been catapulted from his coffin: upright and stiff, he's seen behind a screen of large black bullet holes that call to mind his assassination by Fascist forces.

Barreres's best paintings are his least symbolic — García Lorca registers as wrenching, and the beatific bull fighter with the protruding crotch who's clutching in each hand an ear of the dead beast suggests a mock ascension, at once hilarious and unsettling. In other works, though, the allegorical takes over and we're left with the painterly equiva-

lent of a movie scene that needs gushy violins because it can't muster its own drama. In one, a cascade of morning glories falls to the earth, where a gray Beatrix Potteresque rabbit looks off to the right. In another, a cascade of butterflies (some of which — in a no doubt meaningful gesture — have been blotted out by an overlay of black) never quite transcends wallpaper.

Aida Laleian has the opposite problem. Her dozen diminutive hand-painted color photographs on porcelain give me the sense that I'm listening to Beethoven with the volume turned down. The imagery begs for a size it's denied.

Laleian's immensely complicated yet seamless scenes call to mind a temple frieze — despite their grounding in personal subjects and domestic imagery,

these marvelously crowded creations conjure the monumental. For every self-portrait of the artist or picture of her daughter in a leotard, there are two corresponding centaurs or Roman statues or arabesque pediments to Corinthian columns. In *Drawing the Faun*, the artist looks as if she were sinking into molten marble. Her kerchiefed head looks down on her upper body, which has been taken over by a confusion of stone figures: bearded men and horses' bodies and shrouded women bearing votive candles. In *An Unlucky Filament*, the artist has superimposed her undressed upper body on two large figures in the foreground, a rearing stallion and a naked man. In the background, ornate marble bas reliefs frame the central hybrid animals.

The boldness of Laleian's imagery, its bottomless bestiality, and its shameless liberties with concepts and forms all seem ill-suited to the tiny space she's allowed. Neither is her use of porcelain convincing. Perhaps she hopes to heighten the materiality of her images by transferring her photographs to thin, flat, size-limited expanses of breakable clay. (As fired porcelain increases in size, so does the risk of breakage.) Were she to begin to contour the porcelain to correspond with the bulbous and tumescent images she shoots, and were those images in turn allowed to dominate visually, that would be another story, one many would wish to hear. ■

