

Artist creates 18 digital dramas

By PAUL PICKREM Valley Arts

DIGITAL IMAGES with titles such as Loose Ends, Sibling Rivalry and Wishful Thinking, on exhibit at ARTSPlace Gallery, Annapolis Royal, can be hard to explain in words. That's why visual artist Susan Malmstrom called her solo exhibition Beyond Words.

Malmstrom describes the 18 digital photographic images as "metaphoric collages." Each has a two-word title — a contemporary idiom — and is framed with scanned three-dimensional objects, traditional photos and modern digital images.

"I started with the two-word phrase, which is a departure for me," the Bear River artist said in a recent interview at the gallery. "The titles were so important I incorporated them into each piece."

She said the titles came from a journal where she wrote the commonly heard phrases. Then she went into her studio with a collection of three-dimensional objects, such as a bird's wing, rabbit's foot, plastic toys, spools of thread and animal skeletons, which were arranged with old-style and modern images before being scanned digitally so they could be edited and framed. What began as an artist's book grew over a two and a half year period into the series of individual dream-like representations of reality which make up Beyond Words.

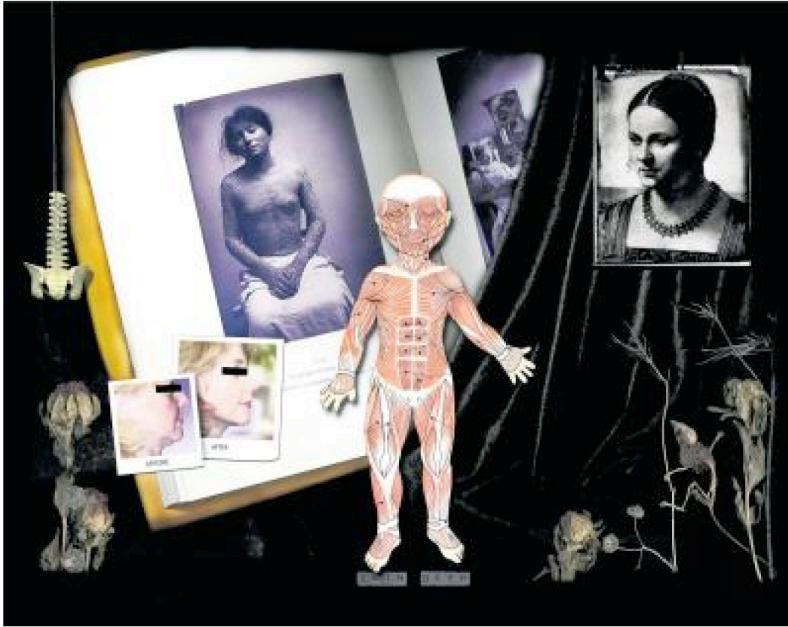
The piece Malmstrom called Skin Deep is typical in that it speaks through haunting images. Decaying plants and animal skeletons frame a Victorian-era medical journal with a black and white photo of a woman, naked from the waist up, who is horribly disfigured by a very visible skin disease. In startling contrast, it also has before and after Polaroids from a modern advertisement of a woman who has had plastic surgery on her face. Another layer of juxtaposition has an etching by the Renaissance artist Alfred Durer of a 16th century woman, shown from the shoulders up. Finally, there is a cartoon image of the dissected musculature of a child.

Malmstrom, who has also suffered from a skin disease, said the disfigured woman "is so ravaged she made it into a medical text. But, she is still beautiful and has such a calm look on her face." She said the 16th century woman is "a little chunky, not blonde and has circles under her eyes. We would see all kinds of things wrong with her today."

Malmstrom grew up in Southern California where she said surface beauty is very important. "Time is fleeting and beauty doesn't last," she said. "People there will do anything to stave off decay. But, its all for naught."

She said she wants the viewer to see the piece as beautiful even though some images are disturbing.

"I want you to be thinking about language. And, in this piece, thinking about issues of beauty. But I want you to go beyond beauty. Bring your own accumulated life experiences and get lost in them. I want you thinking. What's been interesting for me is how people interpret them for themselves."



The metaphoric collage Skin Deep uses images of women from the 16th century, the Victorian era and modern times to explore the idea of female beauty. (Paul Pickrem)



Visual artist Susan Malmstrom is showing 18 digital images she describes as metaphoric collages in her solo exhibition at the ARTsPLACE Gallery, Annapolis Royal, to May 4. (Paul Pickrem)