

THE ARTS

@ajc.com

Your guide to art exhibits, popular attractions and event venues and news is accessatlanta.com/events.

A riot of hues and human forms

Shara Hughes' work grabs the eye.

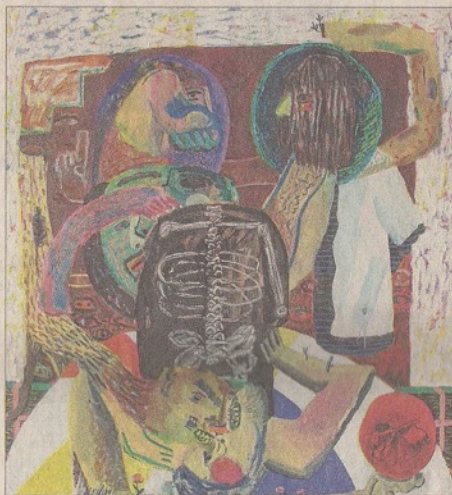
'Guess You Had to Be There' shows through June 28.

By Felicia Feaster
For the AJC

Chock full of juicy color and frantic, busy action, Shara Hughes' paintings are assaults on the eyes. Her 10 works on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia as part of the 2012/2013 Working Artist Project fellowship feel much like visual puzzle pieces one needs time and patience to assemble into a whole.

Hughes' riots of hue, texture and form are almost too much to initially take in. Her painting style, which flits between abstraction and representation, is full of hurried, madcapped brushstrokes and jagged swaths of paint that — depending upon how she wields her brush — can suggest fur, hair, fabric or the mad doodles of someone compelled to fill every possible surface of the canvas.

Rendered in oil, enamel, acrylic and spray paint on canvas, Hughes' works in "Guess You Had To Be There" expand the artist's previous fixation on interior spaces. As in her earlier works, Hughes has kept her emphasis on bold color. But instead of the shelter magazine living rooms and bedrooms that defined her other



"The Juggler" (2013), left, and "My Hero" (2014) are two of 10 pieces artist Shara Hughes brings to the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia through June 28. CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS BY THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART OF GEORGIA

work, she has begun to put people front and center in "Guess You Had to Be There." That choice, to include a panoply of human subjects whose wildly contorted limbs, faces and bodies twist like kudzu across the painting surface, gives her work a new emotional resonance. Hughes' figures shape shift, one minute suggesting Picasso's Cubist, abstracted human subjects, and then the bold colors and lush, forces of life and nature in the works of Paul Gauguin or Henri Matisse. Hughes puts those references into a blender, hits "pulverize" and comes up with something more contemporary that hints at the fractured consciousness and chaos

of modern life. "Only the Lonely" hints at the sense of emotional tumult that characterizes many of the pieces in Hughes' exhibition. It's done in the manner of a formal portrait, featuring a figure holding a large bundle that could be animal or human. The presence partly obscures the figure, devouring it with its bulk. The work suggests all of those classical oil paintings of Madonnas and child hung in museums around the world, but this one's infused with a sense of unbalanced and difficult relationships that feels utterly contemporary. Many of Hughes' works reference the stylistic hallmarks of other artists,

as well as the timeless myths of art history's past. In the Gauguin-lush "Green Monster," a nude figure stands in the midst of an impossibly verdant, earthly paradise marked by a flowing river and enveloping foliage. The association with both paradise and paradise lost is evoked in a piece of fruit that emerges from the dense green backdrop, offered up by an extended, reptilian hand. But rather than a literal Garden of Eden, in "Green Monster" Hughes seems more interested in evoking a sense of menace amid splendor. As with all of her work, your eye works overtime to make sense of the complex visuals where birds and fish lurk in the

background and nothing seems fixed or simple. But eventually details emerge that allow your brain to stitch together the bits and pieces into a still-fractured narrative. As much as it strives to evoke the frenzied highs and lows of emotions rendered outward, Hughes' work is also cool-headed and intellectual in how it talks about art history. Her technique often pivots on the act of painting, and references its past. Hughes uses colorful hot pinks, canary yellows and tree frog greens to create a kind of frame around her action. Those frames remind us we are looking at a staged performance the artist has created. The act of looking at scenes

she creates through the lens of these frames is a reminder of artistic control and intent. Artists pretend to offer us some special, privileged view of the world in their work. But Hughes' frame lets us know the artist also controls what we see every step of the way. As the show's title "Guess You Had To Be There" suggests, there is something shaggy about this body of work, a gesture of shrugged shoulders at the human condition. Hughes' work implies resignation about the nature of things, especially where relationships are concerned. Perfect it's not, her paintings suggest, but it's all we've got. Nothing is easy in Hughes' work, but it's worth working for.

ART REVIEW "Guess You Had To Be There"

Through June 28, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays. \$5, nonmembers; \$1, students with ID and seniors 65 and older; free, children 6 years of age and younger; members and active U.S. military. The Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, 75 Bennett St., Suite A2, 404-367-8700, www.mocaga.org. **Bottom line:** Complex work that deals with both art history and the rendering of extreme emotional states into painterly form.

Rachel Uffner Gallery
170 Suffolk Street
New York, NY 10002

+1 212 274 0064
info@racheluffnergallery.com
racheluffnergallery.com