

Artist rolls dice with gambling-themed paintings

LISA ESHERICK is a Berkeley artist who currently has an exhibit of her casino paintings on display in San Francisco. But in her case, life doesn't imitate art. She isn't a gambler.

"Not in the least," she said Tuesday. "I would go to a nickel or quarter slot machine, but I don't even do it. I'm interested much more in the faces of people, and that's what drew me to it."

While showing a guest from Germany a slice of American life, she took him inside a Reno casino, a place that was more foreign to Esherick than it was to the tourist.

"I was just amazed," she recalled from that mid-1990s experience. "I was struck by the light, the way it exaggerated the features on faces, and the sharpness of color, which



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is vibrant in the American casinos."

Gambling didn't grab a hold of her, but gambling art occupied the next seven years of her life, taking her to Las Vegas and then overseas to Germany and Russia, where she spent considerable time at the roulette tables.

"I don't know anything about the tables," she said, "but I'm fascinated by what



MATHEW SUMNER/STAFF

LISA ESHERICK, a Berkeley-based artist seen at the George Krevsky Gallery in San Francisco on Tuesday, has an ongoing exhibit of casino-scene paintings at the gallery.

goes across the (faces) of people as they're handling their money. They're sort of putting themselves out, but they don't really want to disclose exactly what's going on. There's an

intensity and yet a restraint at the same time — the classic poker face."

Esherick wasn't fooled.

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She captured perfectly, in acrylic abstract figurative form, the faces and mannerisms of the gamblers.

Her art, though, isn't restricted to the roll of the dice.

Esherick, 67, who was raised in Marin County and studied with Richard Diebenkorn and Manuel Neri at the San Francisco Art Institute, has traveled the world in pursuit of artistic diversity. Thus she has painted figures inside trains, airports, public baths and at aquariums — people looking at fish looking back at them. She has drawn Bay Area commute traffic and rather gruesome Russian beach figures.

Her paintings can be seen at the George Krevsky Gallery, 77 Geary St. in San Francisco, through Nov. 29.

George Krevsky, the owner of the gallery since 1992, has exhibited Esherick's work previously. But after seeing her casino paintings, he checked his calendar for a fall opening.

"She takes me back to (Henri Toulouse-) Lautrec and (Edgar) Degas, and a bridge with the impressionists," said Krevsky, 69, who lives in Oakland. "It's color, it's exciting, it's refreshing, and she really captures a lot about our culture. These are the people we live with."

There's another aspect of gambling that hooked Esherick — the timeliness.

"You have this odd atmosphere where you have no idea of what time of day it is," she said. "There's a kind of dullness because they're there such a long time, 10 hours at a stretch. But at the tables, they have to move on. I guess pit bosses count the numbers (on cards)."

Esherick was allowed to photograph gamblers in Reno. She had the same courtesy in Las Vegas until dealers decided she might be counting the numbers. In Germany and Russia, she was permitted only to draw the gamblers.

However, after all that photographing and drawing, she invented the gamblers from images within her own mind. And she presented them as total strangers in a weird sort of bonding.

"A gambling casino is a public event where you don't know who's sitting next to you," she said. "It's not an intimate thing, but they're thrown into an intimate situation. Dealing with your own money becomes intimate."

There's a distinct difference, she discovered, between American and foreign casinos. It's elegance. Abroad, there are wood-paneled rooms and chandeliers, and males are required to wear a jacket and tie. It's a more sophisticated James Bonds-like atmosphere than found inside our comparatively mundane gambling palaces.

A strange juxtaposition exists in Esherick's art: Risking money on canvas during a rough economic period now for our country.

"Life is a gamble," Krevsky offered.

Yes, but will he be able to sell gambling art during these recessionary times?

"We're very optimistic," he said. "We show quality art. The sky's not falling down."

It's a matter of letting the chips fall where they may.

Dave Newhouse's columns appear Mondays, Thursdays and Sundays, usually on the Metro page. Know any Good Neighbors? Phone 510-208-6466 or e-mail dnewhouse@bayareanewsgroup.com.