A compelling look at a family of artists

Woodmans together for the first time

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"Betty, Charlie, Francesca & George" at samson is a family show. George Woodman, a photographer and painter; and ceramicist Betty Woodman have been married for more than 50 years.

Their children also grew up to be artists: Charlie Woodman makes videos. Francesca Woodman, who took her own life in 1981 at 22, specialized in moody black-and-white photographs, often featuring occluded self-portraits. Since Francesca's death, her career has soared, with a large retrospective coming to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art this year.

The samson show is the first time all four have exhibited together, and the exhibit is inevitably full of intrigue. How have they influenced each other? It's hard to resist reading family psychodrama into the interplay of the art — Betty's ceramics and paintings are so exuberant in gesture and color, for instance, but Francesca's photographs very nearly withdraw into themselves, leaving a nimbus of hurt.

It's not entirely fair to make those associations. Betty's works here are contemporary, as are Charlie's and Georges'; Francesca's date as far back as 1972, when she took an extraordinary "Self-Portrait at 13 (Boulder, Colorado)," in which she sits, face obscured by her hair, amid a blurred composition of lines and planes of light and dark.

In Francesca's photos, her figure captivates; she had a performer's sassy sense of how her body appeared in space. In one image from the "Eel Series," her nude body curls gracefully around an eel coiled in a bowl. An untitled photo shot at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, N.H., captures her lifting her arms in bark bracelets, her left arm in perfect alignment with the birch tree behind it.

In 2006, the Metropolitan Museum of Art staged a rare retrospective of a living artist, Betty Woodman. Her ceramics are gaudy and audacious, embracing abstract expressionism, moving cheekily between 2-D and 3-D as painting and ceramics breezily collide, and not just in her effusive glazes. "Neapolitan Interior" sets a winged ceramic vessel on the floor before a painting of a sun-washed room; the painting explodes into 3-D with the garishly plaid pot planted in front of it.

The translucent hues in George's painted photographs make a sweet counterpoint to Betty's parade of color. The title of "Classical De Stijl" encapsulates George's aesthetic: He layers colorful geometries reminiscent of the early-20th-century Dutch De Stijl movement toward pure abstraction over black-and-white photos. Here he applies pale, angling polygons of paint over a shot of classical statuary — three headless female nudes. Sometimes the painted passages gracefully direct the eye; sometimes they frame images. But sometimes they merely get in the way.

George's many female nudes make a wild contrast to his daughter's nude self-portraits; the father's are steeped in the historical baggage of the artist's gaze, and the daughter's are subjective, as much about absence as they are about form.

Charlie's video "Heaven" more effectively blends abstraction with representation. It's a contemplative piece, also in black and white, which begins nearly completely in the dark, until glimmers of light appear. Are we gazing up through fluttering leaves? Or down at flashes of sunlight skittering over water? The piece moves from naturalism to abstraction almost imperceptibly; as soon as you think you know what you're seeing, it changes.

"Betty, Charlie, Francesca & George" is a fascinating exhibit, one that should be expanded and mounted by a museum.