

Review of "SCREENED IN, LOOKING OUT" by Carl Mellor

"Leslie Feinberg: SCREENED IN, LOOKING OUT A Disabilities Photo Exhibit," on display at the ArtRage Gallery, honors the life and work of an individual who was a trans activist, a historian, the author of seven books, and lived from 1949 to 2014.

By 2008, Feinberg was dealing with long-term, severe Lyme disease. Indeed, hir (Feinberg's preferred pronouns were hir and ze rather than her and she) artist's statement spoke of living "through soaking sweats and teeth-chattering chills, persistent fevers and immuno suppression, through pain and mobility impairment." In addition, it was very difficult for Feinberg to complete writing assignments.

Because of the illness, Feinberg moved from Jersey City to Syracuse to live with hir spouse, poet Minnie Bruce Pratt. By that time, ze was creating a series of photos with a standard, point-and-click camera. Most of the images were taken from a balcony or through window screens in an apartment located in the Hawley-Green neighborhood.

That might sound like a limited perspective, but the ArtRage exhibition, with its wall display of 29 prints and the entire series of 119 images running on a computer screen, shows that Feinberg's point of view was expansive. Viewers encounter photos documenting neighborhood events: a city crew responding to a water-main problem; a family evicted from an apartment. One image portrays the act of eviction; another depicts the aftermath-- the family's possessions scattered over a parking lot.

Other photos celebrate life in Hawley-Green, as in "Gift for Beloved Neighbors" with its embrace of an array of sunflowers and roses. That image links to "Working Earth," offering a long-range view of an urban garden, and "Working Garden," in which the camera's lens peers through a metal fence toward a gardener.

Beyond that, the show demonstrates Feinberg's ability to execute various types of photos. "Orange Twilight," for example, has a painterly touch as it depicts a mass of clouds that seem to fill the sky. Another image sweeps from the Hawley-Green district toward downtown, while a third moves from a city block to the Syracuse skyline. And one of Feinberg's photographs portrays a lone bird soaring in the sky.

The exhibit also encompasses images not easily categorized. It shifts from the introspection of "Shadow in Hall-Self Portrait" to "Snow Screen," with a winter scene behind the screen, and "Blue Sky, Clouds." in the latter photo, fluffy clouds and a bright sky seem cut off by a screen.

Finally, there's a sense of change in seasons. The bright colors of "Autumn Fog" contrast with a photo depicting puddles, the residue of a winter day. "Winter Travel City" recalls a harsh winter time in which a person in a wheelchair heads down the side of a road.

Very few of the photos are self portraits. However, a series of images selected from Minnie Bruce Pratt's home albums shows Feinberg taking part in multiple demonstrations: against United States funding for a government in El Salvador that committed numerous human-rights abuses, against racism, against arrests of trans citizens, to name just a few. In addition, ze participated in the first national AIDS

protest in Washington, D.C., helped organize meetings regarding the AIDS epidemic, and wrote extensively about barriers to health care, including stigma and economics.

A third segment of the exhibit presents several poems written by Minnie Bruce Pratt, poems that are part of her 2021 collection, "Magnified," published by Wesleyan University Press. The poems, written during the period when Feinberg was extremely ill, are incisive, emotional, and elegiac. They blend references to nature and the Hawley-Green neighborhood, metaphors of time and transition, declarations affirming her partner and their connection of many years.

The ArtRage show combines images and text, and that's a combination which sometimes is less than successful. However, the current exhibition is well executed, with Pratt's poems complimenting rather than usurping Feinberg's images.

And "SCREENED IN, LOOKING OUT" operates with an ambitious agenda. Clearly, it commemorates Feinberg's life and celebrates the photos he created. Yet, it also speaks to loss and struggle, to struggle with pain and impaired memory, to struggle with what Feinberg described as "the geographic and social isolation of severe illness and resulting disabilities."

In that context, the exhibit is reaching beyond one person's narrative to a larger question: how does society treat people dealing with severe illness or disability? One exhibition can't answer that question, but a show can pose it and can challenge viewers to consider its implications. "SCREENED IN, LOOKING OUT" achieves those goals.

The exhibition is on display through July 11, 2021 at ArtRage, 505 Hawley Ave. in Syracuse. The gallery is open from noon to six p.m. on Thursday and Friday and from noon to four p.m. on Saturday and Sunday. To make a reservation to see the show, call 315-218-5711 or access [www.artragegallery.com](http://www.artragegallery.com).

Carl Mellor wrote about visual arts for the Syracuse New Times from 1994 through 2019. He continues to write about artists and exhibits in the Syracuse area.