

## Get Real

Three masters explore realism and treat viewers to deceptively simple art at TCC's Visual Arts Center.

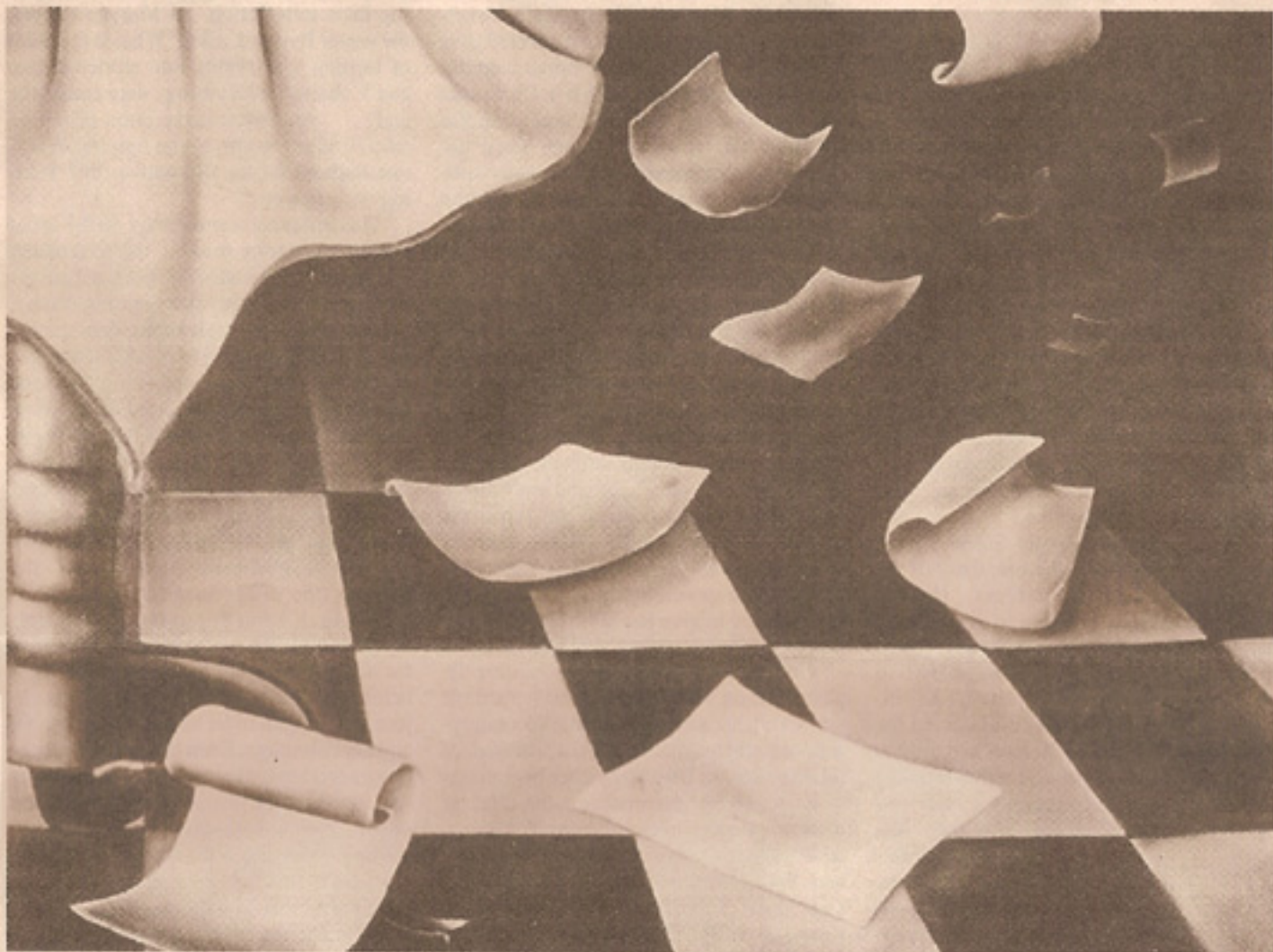
BY CATHERINE DORSEY

REALISM HAS BEEN redefined in a current exhibit at Tidewater Community College's Visual Arts Center in Olde Towne Portsmouth. Three artists working in diverse media explore realism from new perspectives, and their seemingly simple approaches yield surprisingly complex results.

Potter Jim Chalkley, nationally recognized for his functional serving and decorative pieces, offers a collection of earlier work for perusal. Beginning in 1975 with a work created during college and continuing through 1990, the assortment of serving pieces is a strong testament to the consistent quality that continues to attract collectors faster than Chalkley can produce.

Drawing on the influence of Japanese pottery, the earliest works in the show nonetheless hint at the unique style Chalkley would soon develop and maintain. A teapot with bamboo handle and a large, intentionally uneven Shino bowl with pitted glaze are eloquent forerunners to the simple forms that would follow.

Influenced also by Chinese and Korean pottery as well as modern and postmodern movements, Chalkley has continued to experiment with a wide range of color and form, using saturated hues of cobalt and chartreuse, ethereal shades of celadon and pale blue, monochromatic black and white. Each work speaks simply of its obvious function, without any frills. An unadorned black soup tureen and matching bowls are massive, designed to feed a crowd. The luminous black glaze glistens with undertones of graphite and other subtle shades, producing a warm aura not usually associated with black. Five from a set of 16 pale celadon dinner plates, large intricately patterned disks decorated using a straight razor, are artworks worthy of a permanent spot on the wall. The patterns, though hand-cut, are so precisely matched that they could almost have been cast in a mold. Chalkley's precision of process is evident in a perfectly matched stack of black plates: though hand thrown, each is perfectly formed to fit another. Soup bowls with wide, thick rims promise ease of handling when filled to brimming with hearty stew. The interior glaze, an underwater excursion of blues, greens, and browns, issues an invitation to contemplate before filling up. Though supremely functional, each piece assumes equal importance as sculpture, begging to be displayed when not in use. They ask to



*The Breakfast Table*, by Mimi Verhulst Lanese

be handled, to be caressed, to be held and hefted so that their perfect balance can be shown off to best advantage. Here is absolute realism warmly cloaked in beauty.

Like Chalkley, photographer Mark Rhodes is in pursuit of perfection, even searching the shaft of a feather or the underside of a leaf to discover its essence. Pausing to ponder the unexpected, Rhodes identifies a source of inspiration, then brings his camera in close to uncover the beauty in its most intimate details.

In *R.M. Revisited*, Rhodes revisits the sensual curl of a calla lily à la Robert Mapplethorpe. But resisting the bloodless beauty of Mapplethorpe's black and white images, Rhodes encourages the delicate peach and pink blush of a tightly closed bloom to become the focal point of the work. In *Tulip in a Vase*, the scarlet bloom is secondary to the less obvious allure of a

curvaceous green stem and the casual drape of a leaf over the vase's edge.

Other images ignore a lush arrangement of flowers in the foreground to focus on the shimmering fish scale pattern of dirt smearing a windowpane or the faint grid of window screen behind.

Rhodes remembers that as a child we walk looking intently at our feet, always on the lookout for some small treasure: a miniature flower, shiny stone, perfect leaf. Those childhood riches laid out at our feet, glorious bits of nature that we tend to tread unthinkingly across as adults, are enshrined in *Maryland Forest Floor*, and *Moss*. Rhodes' elegant, intimate portraits of nature soften life's harsh realities.

Deceptively simplistic, surreal interior scenes by Mimi Verhulst Lanese become increasingly perplexing under continued scrutiny. At first glance, all is well, then

the floors begin to plunge maddeningly forward. Tabletops spill their mysterious contents: paper airplanes, eggs, wilting blooms, a row of tiny birds. In *Midnight*, the rumbled bed is enigmatically empty. Have its missing occupants bolted suddenly, been spirited away, or never been there at all? In *Greetings from Paris*, a set of plain white bistro dishes resides dully in their cabinet, fading into the shadows. There is a vividly colored postcard of the Eiffel Tower thumb-tacked to a shelf. The mystique and glamour of travel calls out its temporary promises, gleefully oblivious to the daily reality of the plain white dishes behind.

Challenge your perspective of reality through the diverse works of three top-notch artists. Their refreshing and unexpected interpretations of realism remain on view at the Art Center through March 15. Call 822-6999 for details. ■