Fritz Scholder artwork shown in OU exhibit

An ability to remove an image from its everyday context and distill it to its expressive essence — painterly and abstract yet powerfully physical and representational — is found in a show of large “Recent Works” by Fritz Scholder at the University of Oklahoma.

The exhibit is on view in the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art.

ART REVIEW

which Scholder is visiting for about two weeks as an artist in residence and to give a keynote speech at the College of Fine Arts commencement Saturday.

During his visit, Scholder said he was proud of his one-quarter Indian blood but prefers to be called an “American Expressionist” rather than an Indian artist — a distinction his work in the new show underscores.

Confronting the viewer most dramatically are three large acrylic and oil paintings on canvas of an anonymous man’s head and shoulders called “Heaven,” “Purgatory” and “Hell.”

Mysterious golden light emanates from behind a brown, featureless, partly shadow-covered head that seems to be made of energetic brush strokes in Scholder’s painterly vision of “Heaven.”

A written text, collaged into the surface, adds a dimension of verbal self-aggrandizement to his mixed-media painting of a public figure with dripping white teeth, a purple tie and an open mouth making a “proclamation” of some sort in “Purgatory.”

Antelope-like antlers sprout from the head of a dark featureless figure silhouetted in front of an almost blood-red background in Scholder’s version of “Hell” — the scariest of the three paintings, all done in 1996.

Flanking them and complementing them on a single wall of the gallery space are two paintings from his “Millennium” series, done in 1996 and 1997.

In the 1996 acrylic, called “Millennium,” three nude, contorted, gestural figures appear to be falling or rising through a welter of red-violet, possibly bloody forms into an abyss or limbo.

In the 1997 painting “Millennium 12,” an anonymous man and woman stand with their backs to us, impassively watching what may be an explosion near a bleak stretch of highway, winding through purple hills.

Adding to one’s sense of ennu and vague disquiet is “End of Time #2,” a 1996 acrylic canvas of a single boulder sitting in the middle of a flat, empty, desert-like plain.

More energetic but no less threatening is the scribbled, tornado-like funnel moving across a pale pink-violet plain under a darker purple-violet sky in his “Weather #4” acrylic canvas, painted in 2001.

Less ambitious works such as a small 2001 sketch of a skull done in the “artist’s blood on motel paper” are almost equally expressive and effective, despite their smaller size.

No less striking are the artist’s illustrated books and prints: a totemic, mixed media “Eagle Fetish” and a brown-tone photograph of a strange robed figure in a field, carrying a staff or stick, called “Shaman #6.”

Ending the show on an upbeat note are two large paintings from Scholder’s 2002 flower series, a vertically hung depiction of a paint-splattered “Singing Iris,” silhouetted in front of a red background, and a horizontal view of “Three Roses Celebrating.”

Made possible with support from President and Mrs. David L. Boren, Mr. and Mrs. Jerome Westheimer and Ms. Joanna Champlin, the Scholder show is recommended during a run through Sept. 2 at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art in Norman.

— John Brand