After walking around the Boone Sculpture Garden on the south side of the Shatford Library, and making your way through Galloway Plaza, climb up the few steps and enter the library through the doors of the rotunda with its encircling walls. Immediately turn to your left. There is the dedication plaque and portrait of Walter Shatford III, former Pasadena City College Trustee, for whom the library is named.

Follow along that curved wall to see the next work of art I want to talk about. The work is not part of the Artist-in-Residence collection but without the work, this extraordinary collection would not exist. Briefly, here's the story.

In the spring of 1986, professor emeritus of painting at PCC, Suzanne Bravender, organized a solo exhibition of the work of Pennsylvania artist Tom Bostelle in the art gallery on campus, with a joint show at the Brand Library Art Gallery in Glendale. Bostelle was so pleased with the show, that he donated a work to our school on the condition that the work be hung in the PCC library. This request would set a precedent for the placement of future works of art.

In collaboration with library staff, Suzanne selected the vast wall above the wooden card catalogues. There, in the old library building, the piece remained until the new Shatford Library was completed in 1993. At that time, the work was moved to the rotunda where you see it today.

The painting, untitled but based on a series of works by Bostelle known as Shadows, must be considered the catalyst for the birth of the Artist-in-Residence program that Suzanne Bravender, with the support of then president of the college, John Casey, brought to life the following year, 1987.

Composed of three sections of plywood, it is a very large mural, over twelve feet wide and eight feet tall. Bostelle has created a line of around fourteen to fifteen shadowy, androgynous figures that bend and stretch like cast shadows in the late afternoon. The background is washed in white oil paint while the figures themselves are revealed by areas of bare wood, whose natural grain, with a few preparatory pencil marks here and there create the only details in the work.

Strongly two-dimensional, there is a slight sense of depth that comes from the placement of smaller scale figures at the lowest margins of the work. The head of
the largest, centralized shadow figure breaks the top perimeter of the piece. Heads of all the figures are compressed down into their necks. Shoulders are hunched over and arms hang limply with straggly fingers. Find the short figure near the center wearing what appears to be a hat—that may be the artist himself, who often used his own profile in his shadow paintings.

There is emotional and physical pain expressed in these unnerving shadows, establishing a dispirited quality in the work that clearly reflects on Bostelle's fascination with crowds and the challenges of the human condition. He once said, "Crowds have always frightened me. My art concerns the human condition in my time—the paradox of life. I see people theatrically, as on a stage—fractured and distorted by the times, politics, technology, loss of individuality. Life is at the same time more beautiful and more terrible than it has ever been."

Without seeming superficial in our analysis of this work by Tom Bostelle, clearly his theme of reflecting on the paradoxes of the human condition is one that artists throughout the centuries have undertaken. If we take the time to look at works of art, they invariably speak to us about ourselves---good or bad, inspired or mundane.

References:

27 December 2006  
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Through February 23, 2007  

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