

ART REVIEW : Concepts Meeting the Concrete - This year's UCSB MFA exhibition, 'Visible Spectrum,' offers new conceptual perspectives

BY JOSEF WOODARD, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

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This month, in the back gallery of the UCSB Art Museum, a cohesive set piece of art becomes tantamount to a micro-exhibition-in-an-exhibition. Biblical, socio-historical stereotypical and fairytale archetypes are craftily massaged and abused, in two and three dimensions, and the parallel reality of animation onscreen.

Meanwhile, layered, fragmented and kitschy music create an aural patchwork — with vague allusions to music in Jean-Luc Godard's films — which tickles and gooses the air in the room. Methodology behind the well-tooled madness has been conceptualized by Laura Krifka, whose blend of sentimentality and violence creates an aura of danger and disjointed emotions, and elicits a playfully dark overview of the human comedy.

Welcome to this year's model of the MFA show, an annual occasion that has become a rite of passage for UCSB artists making their way out into the world, as well as a bounty of enticements and provocations for art-hungry viewers in the area. Whereas much of what passes through Santa Barbara galleries is safe, tested and proven, the MFA circus tends to traffic in fresh art, marked by both carefully worked-out theoretical notions and deliciously wild card ideas.

Emerging art world trends can often be glimpsed or seen whole cloth in the MFA shows, and this exhibition, inclusive of various media and style imprints, is no exception. As seen (and heard) in Krifka's multilayered showpiece, one advancing trend in fine art is the growing tradition — if career-wise impractical — realm of installation art.

In a way, Raymond Uhlir's self-contained installation, "What Is Best in Life," pursues a path similar to Krifka. He explores reassuring mythologies and psychological creature comforts we humans like to cling to, and subjecting them to scrutiny and irony. In his case, a mixed media installation involves a room with a dirt floor and a polygonal tent-like structure. Peering inside, we find a cocooned microcosm of humanity. A smaller enclosure inside suggests a ritualistic shrine, with fur, baubles, mirror shards and mannequin hands passing for human presence.

In an adjacent gallery within the gallery, Masha Lifshin offers another self-defining installation environment, dubbed "The Parlor of Incidental Aesthetics." This is a funky dreamtime living room, filled with ratty thrift store furniture and televisions of all sizes spewing static or humble animation loops. Trash, of the literal and mental kind, meets up with aesthetics of the borrowed and incidental kind, both embracing and indicting consumer overkill.

Painting does have a say here, too. Shane Tolbert's large abstract paintings play off contrast between the divisions of the organic-looking material and cool, monochromatic zones. One untitled piece enfolds squiggles, like loopy nonsense text, with yellow "legs" attached, giving the painting an impression of a mini-billboard.

Stephanie Washburn's "Margaret Thatcher's Garden" series of paintings slop on the gloppy accretions of paint and almost comically busy whorls and scattered flowerbeds of color. Her paintings go effulgently flowery, in contrast with the dry subversions of her more art-about-cultural work. With her "Television Drawings," Washburn splashes artistic errata on top of random, grainy TV screen shots — getting the best of the boob tube — and in her "Proposed Monuments" series, she defaces and re-routes postcards and other bland mass culture tropes.

Other MFA candidates in the show express their not unhappily divided attentions, a sign of the young and the curious in art today. Karen Spector's section of the exhibition, for instance, veers from spare, greyish inkjet prints, akin to vaporous cloudscapes, over to the droll, minimalist actions on video. In the video "Dance, dance, dance, dance, dance," an echoing image of a woman dancing in different rhythms seems less joyous than a bleary continuum of kinetic gestures, ad nauseum.

Navel-gazing is another sign of the artistic times, as many artists examine their own state of being and the forces making up their past and present. That very tendency is concurrently indulged and wanly spoofed in Lauren Tyler Norby's "The Lauren Tyler Norby Show," a series of funny, self-referential video vignettes featuring art student characters pondering life, morality, art and career options, all acted with charming woodenness before clumsy, cartoony backdrops. It's not unlike the homespun sets in Neil Young's "Greendale" conceptual rock opera (as seen at the Santa Barbara Bowl several years ago).

Taken as a whole, "Visible Spectrum" has a conceptual carnival feeling. Dark, half-winking humor and serious existential and social issues are thrown into a mix involving savvy manipulations of expressive options and mediums afforded today's young artist. Each artist finds a personal route to solving problems created and asks us to bend into their worlds.

And on top of the visible and idea-based fare in the Museum, the MFA show comes, as always, equipped with a potential "we knew them when" factor. Time and fates will tell where these artist wind up, but for now, they have gathered together by academic circumstance to create a show well worth catching.