

santa barbara news-press

SCENE

oct. 1-7, 2010

Renaissance Banjo Man

Comedian/actor/writer/musician/
art enthusiast/possible closet nuclear physicist
Steve Martin and his trusty banjo grace The Granada

The Importance of Backstory

In the intriguing new group show 'Stranger Than Fiction' at SBMA, we find work that freely cross-references other artists and art forms

BY JOSEF WOODARD
NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

It might be possible to breeze casually through "Stranger Than Fiction: Narrative in Works by Selected Contemporary Artists," the new Santa Barbara Museum of Art exhibition, and gain purely visual pleasure from the diversity of styles and visual stimuli. But be advised: More time and close scrutiny will be rewarding. This is a show where context, concept and, yes, wall text, matter. Art for art's sake will have to wait for another time.

In this art, much of it by younger artists based in Southern California, allusions to other art — literature, film, pop music and factors outside the immediate results before us — are part of a critical backstory.

An intriguing glimpse at new, shamelessly narrative art is a cornerstone exhibition of SBMA's autumnal harvest: five exhibits under the rubric "Reframing America." The shows are all tethered to American-rooted themes, in a not-necessarily patriotic but also not-necessarily angry way.

It could be a glib generalization, but it seems as if a core theme in "Stranger Than Fiction" has to do with the neurotic cross-referencing of both high and low cultures, as a reflexive habit in the American grain. It's something in our cultural ethos, a lingering paradox of combining both passion and disdain for Old World values and elitism.

Sometimes in this show, the lines of reference run extra thick, as in Allison Schulnik's imposingly large but visually subdued "Monkey Hobo." Its palpably thick layers of paint on a pale, icing-like surface spin off the subject of Michael Jackson and his pet chimp Bubbles, but immortalized by the bland neo-pop-art of Jeff Koons. Joni Spota's similarly thick, tactile paintings take clever aim at sources as disparate as Italian painter Giotto di Bondone, Jasper Johns (in response to his mid-'50s "Flag") and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini, with his infamous celebration of gaudy decadence, "Il Decameron."

Film, that great leveler among artistic media from the early 20th century onward, keeps slipping into the mix, but in surprising ways. Dawn Clements wins the prize for largest piece, but with the dizzy panoramic drawings of an interior, it keeps its expressive cool and reveals its sources only thanks to the all-important wall text. "Adjoining Rooms (Sudden Fear, 1952)," is an oblique, labor-intensive nod to the tawdry Joan Crawford film "Sudden Fear." It uses multiple angles to disorient the viewer, while paying homage to the film's weapon, cinematography. (Charles Lang, Jr. was cinematographer for the film.)

Fittingly, the collage medium is giv-



'MONKEY HOBO,' ALLISON SCHULNIK

ing on a new and iconoclastic life here. Devin Troy Strother's seemingly innocent "Chuck" is an incendiary take on racial strife, and Nicolau Vergueiro's collage piece is deceptively ragged, playfully donning a mock-pompous title, "History of the World — The Secret of Moving Parts."

Collage-like effects work in a two-dimensional context with Aaron Morse's "The Kingdom of Nature," a busy, cobbled-together image with folk art flair and crazed pictorial logic, the sources of which are 19th-century natural history books. Moving up and over in time and resources, Chicago-based Kerry James Marshall's "Dailies, Suite of 4" pieces together the funny papers, once removed. Marshall creates cryptic comic strips, steeped in black experience, often in conflict with art world attitudes. In one panel, a woman opines, "If you say post-Modern... you might as well say post-Black."

Religion naturally works its way into any conversation about American culture and society, here where freedom of religion presumably still reigns. But satire rears her spiky head, in that corner of the thematic gallery. Cartoonish gruesomeness informs Erin Cosgrove's images based on a fictional pair of martyred heads of a Christian sect. Black humor and graphic novelty blend in with a style loosely borrowed from the tradition of medieval manuscript.

Eric Beltz, a gifted Santa Barbaran artist, continues on the religious — and

nominally sacrilegious — theme with his crisply rendered yet willfully hallucinogenic graphite pieces. In the calm form of his drawings, Beltz creates a woozy mesh of plant life, irreverent Christian imagery of Christ fall-down drunk in the spirit and as the lounging nude martyr. Bringing it all back home, he fragments scenes from the Santa Ynez Valley.

Ironically, the simplest image in the room is the large painting of a slightly distorted couple, in Noah Davis' "inBoil and Margaret." But that artistic plot thickens once we learn of the artist's point of reference, the late writer Richard Brautigan's deliciously surreal and hypnotically melancholic novella "In Watermelon Sugar."

Suddenly, armed with that knowledge, the otherwise murky painting takes on a richer meaning.

In short, the references run long in this show, giving us much to ponder about what lies beneath the surface. Then again, such is the dizzyingly, multi-layered nature of life in American culture. Stranger than fiction, indeed.



'THE KINGDOM OF NATURE,' AARON MORSE

ART REVIEW

'STRANGER THAN FICTION: NARRATIVE IN WORKS BY SELECTED CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS'

When: Through Jan. 2, 2011

Where: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1130 State St.

Hours: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday, closed Monday

Information: 963-4364, sbma.net



'TWO FEATHERS,' FROHAWK