Art from down the hallowed hall

ANNUAL JURIED EXHIBITION BY ART STUDENTS AT SANTA BARBARA CITY COLLEGE SHOWS PROMISE AND A RANGE OF IDEAS AT THE CAMPUS’ ATKINSON GALLERY

By Josef Woodard,
News-Press Correspondent

Over the course of its academic seasons, the Atkinson Gallery at Santa Barbara City College has been living up to a high standard in recent years, under the inspired direction of Dane Goodman and, for the past few years, Sarah Cunningham. Often the focus is on single artists from beyond the region, organized into the gallery’s small but flexible — and stunningly view-endowed — space.

At present, though, the agenda is more in-house — or in-building, being the SBCC Humanities building where the art department and the student artists involved in the current show do their handiwork and plotting. This year’s edition of the annual juried student art show, culled by Brooke Kellaway, Associate Curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara, is a more compact and crisp selection in various media, providing another inviting window on what happens in this creativity-imbued, ship-like building by the sea.

Whereas some student shows can be overwhelming due to the sheer number and diversity of intents and means, the 2015 model finds a more understated path, with breathing room on the walls and floor. Reverberations exist between works, at times.

For example, Chloe Plant’s deceptively neat and cool realist painting “Self Portrait, High Contrast,” with the artist posed glancing idly sideways as if in a photo studio, hangs on a wall directly opposite Scott Everett’s quite different “Self Portrait,” a tongue-in-cheek portrait of the artist as a rugged old school garbage can.

Nearby, another mundane subject is elevated to painting-worthy status, in Ryan Peters’ “Shower Drain,” the watery swirl that turns into a visual action element. Action goes over the top, and catches a wave, in Journey Coward’s “Endless Summer,” a densely-packed, candy-colored matrix of cartoonish glee and a vision of summery abandon and a bit of dread in this town that has enjoyed — and suffered — seeming endless summer in these drought years.

Representing the non-representational pole of expression in this gathering is Unhee Anna Um, whose abstract painting “Pink” is a small, strangely alluring canvas, with an amorphous pink glowing area buried (and protected?) behind other gestures and forms in earthier hues. Taking a different tack to the notion of undercurrent energy in the painting medium, Amber Silva’s “Flower Park” has a black base with a white-washed surface, its paint selectively scraped away to reveal fragmented floral imagery. We get a sense of natural beauty lurking in the underneat, seeking release.

Alex Petersen’s “Pepper Moth” is an impressive large charcoal work, in 50 or so shades of gray to black, in which the “lowly” subject of a moth looms large and heroic. In related news, Byron Blanco’s woodcut “The Namer” is a knotty and intricate, yet tidily symmetrical, suggestion of an insect-like creature of uncertain origin, the uncertainty of which piques our curiosity. Another woodcut piece, Diego Hernandez-Black’s “Live to Fight, Fight to Die,” adopts a gothic narrative scenario, in a foreboding image with a gun-toting skeleton and a sense of yonder peril on the smoky-skied distance.

Sculpture takes some interesting twists and turns in the show, from more conventional pieces to conceptual quirks. Katy Payne’s touching “Childhood Sediment” works well within the “found object” mode, with trinkets and baubles affixed to hunks of tree bark, channeled into a wistful view of fading childhood memory combined with a kind of natural decomposition theme. Sasha Colbert’s “Divide” cleverly plays the role of an ambiguous 3-D topographical map, but with red-tipped matchsticks as building blocks.

From a rougher end of the spectrum of physicality, Untitled pieces by Mariah Moon and Dave McCune combine concrete and long glass shards, making for textual and material studies in contrast. Karl Blasius’ “Missing Child 3,” meanwhile, is a piece conjuring up its poignant and chilling implied story via the contrasting materials of bronze and found object — a baby blanket. And the sculptural piece hardest to ignore in the gallery is Rosa Mendez’s “A Father’s Love,” a large black, deconstructed seahorse made of foamcore and suspended from the ceiling.

In some odd way, Ms. Mendez’ heroic-scaled oceanic equestrian hangs like a motif or siren in the show, connecting the gallery and the campus with the sea beyond. Or maybe that’s the logic-seeking art watcher thinking beyond these walls, in a building that obviously contains the power of creative energy from a definitively diverse artistic population. Student art shows can trigger such curiosity-driven thought patterns, just one reason to check out the latest SBCC art harvest.

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