

# Artistic echoes in hallowed halls

'ART ALUMNI INVITATIONAL' EXHIBIT CELEBRATES THE RE-OPENING OF THE RENOVATED SBCC ATKINSON GALLERY

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## "Art Alumni Invitational"

**When:** through December 5  
**Where:** Atkinson Gallery,  
Santa Barbara City College, 721 Cliff Dr.  
**Hours:** 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Monday-Thursday,  
10 a.m.-4 p.m. Friday-Saturday  
**Information:** 965-0581, ext. 3484,  
gallery.sbcc.edu

This may be a season of looking back in admiration and checking in on the fates of past students in Santa Barbara's higher education art departments. Early this year, UCSB's Art, Design and Architecture Museum hosted an illuminating show of work by alumni, going back decades. The trend continues up at the Atkinson Gallery of Santa Barbara City College, where the first "Art Alumni Invitational" showcases work of students who have passed through these halls between 1966 and last year. Again, the view is inviting, and invitingly varied.

To be more precise, and more to one point of the exhibition, these former SBCC students didn't exactly tread through and work in these halls, but in an older version of the halls and gallery in question. This is one of the special shows intended to celebrate the opening of the newly renovated and improved Humanities Building and gallery space (though its treasured "gallery with a view" status is fully intact, happily).

Gallery director Sarah Cunningham has selected a range of artists, working in two and three dimensions, with humor, personalized inventiveness and a maturing artistic "voice" to boot. Among the treats of the show is the freshness of the art as well as artists who



"Cyclical Yearning," Madeleine Tonzi

have migrated to other cities, from New York (Jules de Balincourt) to San Francisco (Madeleine Tonzi, Cal Volner-Dison) to Los Angeles (Noel Korten), and others new to us, but with the local angle of past connection to this institution.

One artist quite familiar to the Santa Barbara art scene is the distinctive kinetic/metal sculptor Ken Bortolazzo, whose work has often been shown at Sullivan Goss (including a recent show there). A protégé of famed kinetic sculptor George Rickey, Mr. Bortolazzo is known for creating elegant, rugged and a bit surreal sculptures, qualities evident in two small pieces on pedestals at the Atkinson, with opaque steel mesh forms set atop compacted I-beams. Industrial chic meets material poetry.

Another striking entry in the field of metal sculpture here is Mr. Volner-Dison's large and faux furling aluminum and mylar "Flag." The reflective silver flag, devoid of identify-

ing colors or designs, flies in the face of the nationalistic and pride-imploring nature of flags. It signifies only itself, and perhaps the power of a ripe aesthetic notion. A similar cool ironic flair and crafty subversiveness can be found in the same artist's "Where to Start," with faint white letters on the wall running in a looping circle, visually and contextually, spelling out the echoing phrase "simulation is always more dangerous since it always suggests." Read, and repeat.

More attention-grabbing three-dimensional ideas are afoot, particularly in the case of Eric Vrymoed's "The Hand Axe Factory," one of the more audacious yet light-spirited works in the room. Large dental implements seem to interact with Dr. Seuss-y assembly-line references, in a large and gangly white contraption from some dream factory where fears and childhood imaginations ramble.

On more conventional turf — in a largely unconventional and conceptually geared selection in this show — Miri Mara, who runs a studio in Carpinteria, presents poised and beautifully crafted ceramic vessels.

Of the two-dimensional works on view, the largest is also possibly the subtlest. Jessica

Mei Flemming's "900 Yards," a squiggle-festive monoprint tapestry laid out epically on multiple sheets, harnesses visual energies and contrasts of density versus voids, to disarmingly hypnotic ends.

Mr. Balincourt's beguiling small oil on panel paintings, which will be part of a retrospective at the Fort Worth Museum of Modern Art this year, are nocturnal visions, expressed in simple, folk-ish style but with ambiguously sinister implications. In "New-Found-Land" and "Scorpion Bay," we sense the narrative of secretive ventures and social disquiet by night, including "illegal" immigrants' schemes.

In a vaguely related way, Ms. Tonzi's "Cyclical Yearning" is less upfront than it seems on first impact. A stylized and semi-cartoonish play on the flow of natural elements we know from childhood — water evaporating, clouds and rain replenishing the land and earthly water supply — comes equipped with a sense of darkish eco-anxiety in its pictorial tack. Yearning, as in what we in rain-deprived Southern California are immersed in, is an important clue to the underlying meaning of the image.



"Log V," Noel Korten



"The Hand Axe Factory," Eric Vrymoed

Evelyn Contreras brings her own sense of underscoring irony to her picture-making, in muted linoleum cuts and prints, as in "Industrial Landscape" and the poeticized freeway overpass of "Highway Study," where the urbanscape is rendered somehow graceful.

Nature has her way, in another sly way, in Mr. Korten's work. His watercolors in the "Alabama Hills" series depict purposefully sparse and cryptic slices of natural life, which resonate with an actual, physical slice of natural life in "Log V," a tree limb fragment bisected

by a piece of Plexiglas and metal peepholes which playfully offer us windows on some "secret life of the inner tree."

It's easy to appreciate this art on its own terms, and the exhibition as a viable cross-section of diverse contemporary artistic ideas and fruitions. The show's secondary appeal, though, has to do with considering the potential fact that these artworks are remote outgrowths of lessons learned or creative identities colored by experiences had on this very piece of real estate, this art incubator by the sea.



"New-Found-Land," Jules de Balincourt

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