

# Subdividing the Things We Know

MIAMI-BASED ARTIST SIOBHAN MCBRIDE'S ATKINSON GALLERY SHOW, 'EVERY NIGHT IS A PIZZA DINNER,' WORKS THE GRAY ZONE BETWEEN THE REAL AND THE SURREAL

By Josef Woodard, News-Press Correspondent



**Siobhan McBride,**  
**'Every Night is a Pizza Dinner'**  
**When:** through December 6  
**Where:** Atkinson Gallery, Santa Barbara City College, 721 Cliff Dr.  
**Hours:** 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Friday and Saturday  
**Information:** 965-0581, Ext. 3484, gallery.sbcc.edu



'Grid'



'House House (for E.M.)'

Atkinson Gallery SBCC photos

Just as the exhibition title almost whets the appetite with comfort-food promises, while turning left into absurdity, Siobhan McBride's show, "Every Night is a Pizza Dinner," now at Santa Barbara City College's Atkinson Gallery, stakes its considerable claim of appeal on the age-old, surrealist premise of toying with our sense of what's what in the world. In the Miami-based artist's skewed view of the world, as told in a series of deceptively smallish, gouache-on-panel paintings, the proximity and the ultimate disconnect with reality as we know it is what energizes both the art and our responses to it.

To put it another way, hers is a new surrealism based on the slicing and dicing – or the pizza cutter dividing – of fragments of realistic scenery, both seducing and frustrating our empathetic interpretations. The world is a disjointed place in her art, and, of course, outside her art, which circles back to certain recognition of the underlying reality and truth possibly contained in her mild-mannered, wild-ride gallery of pictures.

We come close to understanding the rational reality of a given painting, but are thrown off the scent with varying strategies on the artist's part. There are always riddles and caveats to be sorted out, although no easy answers are forthcoming, and the voids of logic end up being their own reward for the beholder.

In "Cold Storage," a reasonably and pleasantly painted mountainscape scene sits in the top half of the composition above a homespun, Natural History Museum-like bunker, while below are diorama-style tableaux and presumably stuffed animals in an unexplained basement. Meanwhile, "Attic" stacks the referential deck differently. An empty attic in the bottom half of the painting lurks beneath an idyllic, landscape-with-waterfall image above, and begs the question: is the landscape a view of the setting of the house with said attic? Is it a large painting stuck up in the attic? Or is it an unrelated pairing of images? Your guess is valid.

"Grid" poses another brand of a subversive, pictorial "wow" factor. A bland river scene with a peekaboo-oval snatch of landscape hovering overhead in the dark gray clouds teeters into the realm of dreamy, gonzo graphics, with the whimsically nonsensical appearance of multiple dog heads and one human face, floating like random hallucinatory visions. They also serve as strange "grid" points in the compositional structure of the piece.

Titles do matter, in various ways in Ms. McBride's peculiar little paintings. "Pair" refers to the pair of holiday gloves – or are they fanciful, oven mitts? – that function as the centering bit of consensus reality in an otherwise ambiguous, crackpot,



'Pair'



'Cold Storage'

Cubist-flavored, spatial context. Context and perspective also go deliciously askew in "Red Hook Winter," which appears to portray an artist's studio or workspace – until the eye tries to sort out bearings and how the objects, shadows and planes connect by the rules of gravity and space as we deal with them in waking hours.

Hard-edged shapes and a certain dream logic inform the piece "Habitat" with a polar bear in a bleak, zoo enclosure, and a glimpse outside into a distinctly non-arctic topography of the zoo's home base. But, vis-à-vis the artist's apparent, alien view of earthly life and detachment from politicizing her work, we don't get the sense of any socio-naturalist statement being made in this image, a plea to save the polar bears or think twice about the cruelty of some zoos. She just savors the spatial and environmental contradictions, good fodder for her artistic, pizza-cutter mind.

In her art, Ms. McBride is often playing with smug, fixed ideas about habitat, spaces and even the world's workings of humanity's machinery. "House House (for E.M.)" finds two house images stacked vertically. The depictions are only slightly irrational by this painter's standards, but presented as though seen as separate, sequential frames in a film, frozen by a jammed projector, which will soon burn the images we're admiring.

Lastly, in "Every Night is a Pizza Dinner" positioned like something of a minor key coda as the final image, there is "Audiobook," an odd anomaly for the fact of its relative lack of oddity. This dark blue, nocturnal winter scene takes in the snow-covered trees, hills, and presumably skiable white planes, but with its would-be, idyllic scenery, viewed in a murky, cold light, and bathed in ample ambience, if highly muted.

Things are wrong with these pictures, and the wrongness seems vaguely fraught with some inherent or impending dysfunction. For now, though, the colors beckon and the fragmentation game teases the mind's eye, even if there is no resolving answer key to be found.