

Art Things, Small and Smaller

THIS YEAR'S 'SMALL IMAGES' SHOW AT SANTA BARBARA CITY COLLEGE IS GENERALLY A CUT ABOVE THE NORM IN TERMS OF VARIETY AND FRESHNESS OF VISION

By Josef Woodard, News-Press Correspondent



'Small Images'

When: through Nov. 1

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



'Hot Date,' Jim McAninch



'Silver Spoon #15,' Leslie Lewis Sigler

A funny thing happens at the "Small Images" exhibition, a long-standing, annual tradition at Santa Barbara City College's Atkinson Gallery. By way of the built-in scalar consideration of the show, we think small as artists, but also as viewers. Thus, whereas in a conventional group show, the larger sculpture or painting might beg for immediate, eye-grabbing attention, it is the small stuff, the tiny details and sometimes harder-to-find items in the typically busy mix of pieces in a given show.

In the case of this year's "Small Images" model, that smaller-is-better mindset leads straight to a weirdly beguiling photograph just inside the gallery's front door — Gail Pine's "The Overcoat." As the title promises, the object/subject is a vintage overcoat, but so utterly tiny and wispy, and set into an enigmatic dark void of a backdrop, our senses are pulled into some miniaturist's rabbit hole of alternative universe perception. In its humble way, "The Overcoat" is a big deal of a piece, and a fine "how do you do" of an introduction to what this show is about.

This year's selection is a strong one, curated by the Claremont-based collaboration art duo of Tim Berg and Rebekah Myers, who have handily ushered in a discerning eye with outsiders' perspective — a fresh view of the art being made in our regional midst. For one thing, they winnowed out much of the typical seascape and landscape art seen ubiquitously in area galleries. Truth be told, there is a token seascape, being Holli Harmon's moody "Storm," but the gently storm-troubled seascape is painted on a small, oval canvas, and the cozy shaped-canvas effect seems as much a kitschy semi-parody of plein air doings as a sincere effort in that genre.

Miniaturist gestures can convey a particular charm, just as a matter of process and readjusted scale. In the sculptural contingent in this show, we are drawn into the pinchable-cute allure of the wee couch and stove in Jim McAninch's piece with the unapologetic punning title, "Hot Date" (punning itself is a diminutive branch of the humor world). Sandra Torres' "Toast," a porcelain tea set shrunk down to nearly dollhouse scale, has its own sentimental buzz, while the relief piece by Charles Starr, "This is Not My Beautiful House" twists its quotation of the Talking Heads lyric about alienated suburban life into a setting of a Lilliputian-sized, plastic astronaut on a yellow-moon-cheese landscape. These artworks play with the child-like, imaginative realm where toys and dolls gain power.

A different child's eye view enters the picture with one of the best paintings in the room, Mary Barda's "I Got It, I Got It," with its stylized faux antique image of girls on a



'Astronauts Like Cheese,' Dan Levin

Atkinson Gallery photos



'Familial Faces: Veronica,' Connie Connally

fantasy grid reminiscent of Lewis Carroll and Henry Darger. Beth Stevens' untitled nude study combines compactness of size with a seeping, smudged watercolor effect to convey reality gone dreamy, whereas Mary Freericks' "Dream" achieves its half-waking, ambiguous ends through a stark, sketchy drawing style.

A more traditional painting approach, but made intriguing by the tight cropping and "small images"-suitable scale, are Connie Connally's "Familial Faces" series of in-their-face portraits, cleverly hung so that "Veronica" gazes across the gallery at "Gary." In between those pieces, we find such little creative bursts of pleasure as Beth Stevens' "Gerber Baby," a solar etching joining the iconography of Catholic female saints,

symbol of piety with the famed, pudgy, Gerber baby mug, symbol of all-American innocence. Let's just say it packs a lot into a small space.

To these eyes, one of the show stealers in the room is Elizabeth Mitchell's "Anodyne," another piece, which while not nearly as tiny or squint-necessitating as "The Overcoat," wears its expressive powers lightly, and surreally. The etching returns us to the realm of dreams in which a nude female figure with a bird's head is surrounded by burning tree stumps. By the rules of dream logic, and art logic, we accept these seemingly irrational visual truths to be self-defining as a narrative, and the scene itself has a cryptic charisma that extends beyond the work's modest actual size.