

Art As Authority: Part I, II, and III

The "New Contemporaries" @ Simayspace - Part I - OR
Impressions: soleil couchant à l'ouest



"Industry Need Not Want"(detail) - Allison Wiese

A personal dilemma I have had lately, when visiting an exhibition, is what information am I relying on - meaning what do I exactly see in front of me - and what do I need to fill in with past visual experiences/memories, knowledge or these days, an artist's website. It's as if I need some sort of cultural reference guidebook or art historical dictionary to remind me where I've seen work like this before let alone getting a crack at, or a glimpse of its ubiquitous meaning. Unfortunately, some of these references hark back to the abundance of imagery in the public domain (freebies) - then appropriately appropriated by the artist or somehow eluding to past art historical movements without fully embracing or challenging them. It is a problem I see in much of the artwork being made here in San Diego. It is also what I've seen in the "New Contemporaries" exhibit on view at the Simayspace Gallery, part of the San Diego Art Academy downtown.

The "New Contemporaries" is a group exhibit of 17 local and emerging San Diego artists in which 3 out of the 17 will be chosen to exhibit their works alongside 3 career or established artists. The established artists of course get to choose who they want to exhibit with. The whole notion of established, mid-career or emerging artist status seems rather archaic to me these days. A definite hold-over from the late 80's and huge retrospective shows that major museums were handing out to these established artists like lollipops. And in the case of this show, their status doesn't appear to benefit anyone since there hasn't been any mentorship or internship per se. The selection of the 17 seems to be one of style over cohesiveness and I can only suppose that the jury of the three established artists will be one of similarities and likeness - viewing by the work they themselves are producing.

Why the match-ups? A little background information might be helpful. It is part of the preliminary selection process for candidates vying for the San Diego Art Prize which is intended to award the "defining trends of the San Diego art scene" upon them. The San Diego Art Prize is presented in conjunction with the [San Diego Visual Arts Network](#), [SanDiegoArtist.com](#), [L Street Art Gallery](#) of the Omni Hotel and organized by [Art Girls Inc.](#) - director Ann Berchtold. The 2006-2007 SD Art Prize recipients were - established artist first, emerging artist second: Ernest Silva & May-Ling Martinez, Jean Lowe & Iana Quesnell and Raul Guerrero & Yvonne Venegas. This year's 2007-2008 recipients - established artists only at the time of this writing: Marcos Ramirez (Erre), Eleanor Antin and Roman De Salvo.

Now group shows can be wildly successful or wildly disappointing depending of course on the curator's theme and/or goal, supporting documentation, the works selected and how well all this blends together. It's certainly not a requisite for a good show but it seems to me that in the past, curators had the luxury and "embarras de choix" of work that was already firmly directed and deeply rooted in its convictions and message. It was often the curator who looked to the artist as inspiration for an exhibition. Today it feels very much the opposite. I see most curated shows with the curator having the "idea" and the artists who must adapt their work to the theme - often producing just variations on their current body of work by adding just a pinch of this or that required element or style for entry. For the gallery visitor who gets around, especially so in such a small art community as San Diego has, it is quite similar to finding a hair in your soup. Fine if you don't see it, terrible if you do. Just because you can show in repeated venues or multiple theme shows doesn't mean you have to.

Which brings us back to the San Diego Art Prize nominating committee who gave Doug Simay of Simayspace Gallery, a list of 17 (pre-selected) artists to choose work from and to present them all together in one show. 17 artists in a relatively small but nice gallery space is no mean feat and Simay appears to pull it off with ease and room for all. What isn't clear is if this is an accurate picture of what is being made here in San Diego and if it is the most appropriate and contemporary work the artist can/could make. I have my doubts. Now one could certainly argue that this is to be expected given a prescribed selection and the effort to represent each artist fairly and in her best light. But do we need to be fair? One could also anticipate a smorgasbord panorama of works in varying degrees of quality and importance, but is it enough? Is this the best San Diego has to offer within its ranks of emerging artists? Its New Contemporaries? Why do I have the impression that a whole range of "other" emerging artists here in San Diego were never considered or even invited to participate? Honestly, I won't believe that this is the best work that's being made, and if it is, a majority of it is lacking the depth and range to support a thriving evolving art community. If we're trying to define trends it is at the expense of the art being made.

A trend implies a certain temporality, a blip on the radar screen, a display, a "mise en scene" of a particular fashion (movement) and does nothing to define the direction, substance or content of said trend nor does it pretend to guarantee any longevity. This is because, and it is more and more apparent here in San Diego, the reasons for organizing any exhibition either in galleries, private spaces or to some extent at the MCA are for maximum exposure, low risk/investment and social networking. Where is the art in all of this? On the walls of course but it is merely a backdrop for a larger not so complex interaction of artists and people interested in the process and mechanics of art making or art viewing.

The art hanging on the walls is little challenged by its artists and public or critically questioned upon and suffers but a cursory glance. Once you've taken the focus off the art, the artist (and it just might be human nature) feels no need to challenge him or herself nor does he feel the pressure of others who might be mining similar or converse ideas that might be better than his own. Without a critical eye and dialogue amongst peers - which may come from many different sources - coupled with a weak selection process (no reflection or criteria for judging beyond that it is simply "art"), it can stifle the desire to compete intellectually amongst all the actors in that arena equally with the paint brush or with words. To simply be the best at what you do is no longer a necessity given there is no difference between each work of art - which ultimately leads to beige mush. Within these loosely defined parameters, the level of consciousness of each artist in her determination as to what is or is not finished meaning ready to be shown can vary greatly. There needs to be a minimum of objective criticism and judgment, benchmarks I suggest sardonically, which enables the individual artist and viewer to gage a certain level of commitment, intent, quality and goals achieved. Art for art's sake can no longer live as the sole and unique sign of integrity and universal truths in a time of great social and political changes without the passion and drive of the artist who must bring back that focus back onto the artwork she makes and the public who views it. The artwork is self-evident and rarely hides itself from scrutiny.

If San Diego can achieve a certain amount of insightful self-criticism and reasoning, a certain standard of reflection as to where we stand as artists here but in the art world as well - what makes us unique compared to others for example - if San Diego can do this, find that unity and vision as contemporary artists in a very real world, then we have the chance of making some of the best art possible.

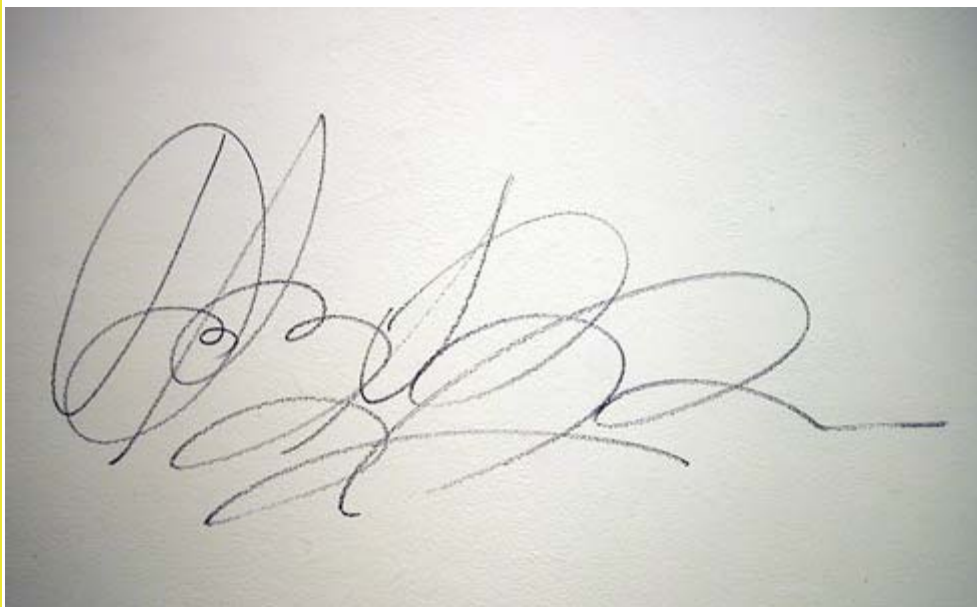
Kevin Freitas

The second half of this essay will review the following artists works participating in "New Contemporaries" :

Alida Cervantes , Allison Wiese, Andy Howell , Ben Lavender , Brad Streeper , Brian Dick , Camilo Ontiveros , Lael Corbin , Christopher N. Ferreria, Jason Sherry , Matt Devine , Pamela Jaeger , Nina Karavasiles , Tania Candiani , Nina Waisman , Shannon Spanhake , Tristan Shone

The "New Contemporaries" @ Simayspace - Part II

The following is a review of 9 of the 17 artists exhibiting in the "New Contemporaries" exhibit at the Simayspace gallery downtown. Part III will follow soon after.



"Shannon Spanhake by Doug Simay" - Shannon Spanhake

Shannon Spanhake (www.shannonspanhake.org) engineer of *airBUD* - a wireless and mobile device that monitors personal exposure levels to air pollution, and who has also planted flower beds in potholes throughout the streets of Tijuana in a cross cultural and across the border exchange, offers the viewer a conceptual farce for lack of a better description of her work entitled "Shannon Spanhake by Doug Simay".

The piece in question is a scrawl done in black marker directly on the wall, a reproduction of Shannon's signature one assumes, by Doug Simay himself. I confirmed the hunch (stop if you don't like spoiler endings), while he explained that he was given a few attempts to copy Spanhake's autograph, then handed a marker and said allotted wall space with one try to get it right. The result is less than appealing and barely visible due to its placement and a spotlight glaring down upon it. A lone label with the real artist's name printed on it, Shannon Spanhake, sits to the left of the work to indicate that it is indeed art. Ok we get it, but I no longer want to think about it as a slew of artists come to mind, the likes of Lawrence Weiner, Kosuth, Bruce Nauman - even graffiti artists - or for that matter, any one of the women artists in the WACK! exhibit who conceived this "art making by verbal or written instructions" 30 years earlier and did it with so much more elegance. I give up; I don't want to figure out all the complex interstices of possible meaning, subtle associations and self-referential satire. Humor? Irony? I don't care. The selling of art, often heard about when it reaches into the millions on the auction block, is often neglected when it comes to selling it in a show. The \$3000.00 price tag on Spanhake's drawing makes me further question the sincerity of the work. I imagine this is the point.



"This is What We Are Up Against in the Nam" - Jason Sherry (click for larger image)

"This is not Johnson's war. This is America's war. If I drop dead tomorrow, this war will still be with you."

"We are not about to send American boys 9 or 10 thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves."
- Lyndon B. Johnson

Sound familiar? I'm sure it does for Jason Sherry (www.jasonsherry.com) who points this out to us in "This is What We Are Up Against in the Nam." Sherry has created a sublime work of art, has re-created a relic of a bygone era - the Vietnam War to be exact - an era that we are still feeling repercussions from today mirroring to some, our prolonged involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is a timely object indeed - acting with deadly precision and bravado on the current political stage - it is beautifully manufactured, as it sits encased in a long coffin-like shadow box with dark royal blue velvet lining the interior. Blue is for Royalty but an AK-47 is for dealers and buyers of weapons. But Sherry's weapon of choice and in art is not just any AK-47, it is one that has been carved out of bamboo from the barrel down to the gun sights, including the bullet clip and the barrel stock of this most revered killing machine. The only remains of an actual AK-47 that haven't been carved by Sherry are the butt of the gun and the hand grip. Look closer and the gun's barrel is strategically pointed at the bust of Lyndon B. Johnson printed on some faux paper medallion enshrined by Laurel leaves, underneath is a little brass plaque that reads "This is what we are up against." Indeed we are, then as in now. Placed below the rifle is a P.P. silver U.S.A.R. insignia (helicopter assault division?) that is a powerful and poignant reminder of the losses suffered "over there."

I had the pleasure of seeing Sherry's work in an earlier show organized at the Zedist Gallery in Normal Heights, and was impressed by its freshness and his technique of weaving collage and printing techniques into the work with constrained doses of political and social satire. It seems nothing is out of bounds in Sherry's world. Other splendid works in the Simayspace exhibit include: (Spock) "In My Country Science is Gay" and "According to the Bible Code the Apocalypse is Going to be Fucking Action Packed." You have to give credit to Sherry for his sensible use of collage, always finely incorporating it into the body and content of the work beyond the simple urge to juxtapose contrasting images for their face or nostalgic value.



"(Spock), In My Country Science is Gay" - Jason Sherry



"According to the Bible Code the Apocalypse is Going to Be Fucking Action Packed" - Jason Sherry

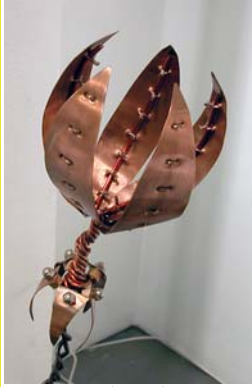
Benjamin Lavender (www.benjaminlavender.com) has exhibited three welded steel and concrete sculptures that seem rather strangely out of context with the rest of the works in the show. Perhaps it's not his fault I would imagine, having been pre-selected to exhibit as an emerging artist. But for the curator who's organizing and sampling from this random pre-selection selection committee's selection, solely relying on his expertise and the artwork before him, it's not surprising to get some pieces that just don't fit one way or another. You select what you're given which typically has nothing to do with the art - even if it's good, bad or indifferent. And in the case of Lavender's pieces, while beautifully made, they don't exactly determine a defining trend in contemporary art or sculpture but define at least for me, a trend in contemporary decoration - and I don't mean this pejoratively. I don't believe that the work is strong enough to move the viewer into another realm of experience or sensation beyond seeing his pieces as representations of various plants and trees made from steel. "Ocotillo" is the most successful piece in my view, elegantly translating the beautiful and spindly stalk-like form of the Ocotillo desert plant in bloom - unique only to the southwestern United States and northern Mexico.



Benjamin Lavender



"Long Claw" - Benjamin Lavender



"Long Claw"(detail) - Benjamin Lavender



"Ocotillo"(detail) - Benjamin Lavender



"Totem Pole (Nation Wide Museum Mascot Project)" - Brian Dick

Brian Dick (www.artmag.com/autresnouvelles/dick/home.html) exhibits a floor to ceiling totem pole entitled "Totem Pole (Nation Wide Museum Mascot Project)" made out of afgan blankets - yes the kind your mother used to knit - socks, pillows, slippers, plastic cups and clothing pins. It's a massive piece held together rather precariously that towers over the viewer in the gallery. It may not be done in the Kwakwaka'wakw style of carving from British Columbia, but Dick's totem is certainly indicative of the American style of the art and culture of thrift store bargain hunting, garage sale leftovers and grandma's hand me downs. The abundance of stuffed animals, Sponge Bob Square Pants slippers made in China and afgan blankets from the 70's holding this pole up is hallucinating.



"Totem Pole (Nation Wide Museum Mascot Project) - detail" - Brian Dick

Satire? Humor? Commentary on American consumerism? Is it poking fun at every high school's mascot in every town and city in America? Is it a representative of a new found or dying indigenous culture, tribe or clan? Or are these items donated to Dick's mascot project, acquiring a blanket here a stuffed animal there, travelling to various museums and galleries growing all the time in height and bulk as it's installed? One can only guess. The work suffers though from too much open ended and fill-in-the-blank interpretations to be successful. Instead it relies on the inherent iconic and bas culture attraction of the materials used which is in sharp contrast to their real-life non-art meaning and existence. The piece is not subversive enough to be critical, not kitschy enough to be catchy and not humorous enough to be satirical - it's just fun. Art can be fun - or a totem to one's life.



"Totem Pole (Nation Wide Museum Mascot Project) - detail" - Brian Dick



"Totem Pole (Nation Wide Museum Mascot Project) - detail" - Brian Dick

Camilo Ontiveros (www.exchangealteration.blogspot.com) has installed a smoky plexiglass cut-out of three running figures - a man, woman and child - exiting out of or running through (across) the wall they're fastened to. Installed side by side at equal distances between one another, organized in a typical patriarchal manner with the man leading, you'll soon realize that it is a 3-D sculpture of the many border crossing panels motorists will find lining the freeways in San Diego. The goal is to avert and caution the passing motorist to the possible "illegal" crossing of the border by "illegal immigrants." A timely piece indeed considering the recent second go-round defeat of the President's immigration bill in congress but is it adding anything new to the debate? Ontiveros' "untitled" work does appear to be an extension of his "CAUTION" project produced during Labor Day weekend of 2005 that was meant according to the project's statement " to emphasize on the inequalities faced by undocumented immigrants who come to the United States to work and earn money at unfairly low wages. Using the CAUTION sign, he(Ontiveros) altered their wording to play with the meaning of the icon and the phrases used." Ontiveros had printed and pasted onto the actual freeway panels, such phrases as WANTED, CASH ONLY, FREE MARKET that mimicked economical jargon and commercial buzz words, but that also implied the only valuable and "decent" labor market in America is a free one. It also lowered their "illegal" albeit temporary immigrant status to that of common criminals. No rights, no justice and very little pay.



"Untitled" - Camilo Ontiveros



"Industry Need Not Want," "Root Hog or Die" - Allison Wiese

Ontiveros' sculpture however, much like the panels exhibited by Allison Wiese (www.allisonwiese.info) - high intensity sheeting on aluminium or basically the material used to make road signage - suffer greatly within the confined space of the gallery. Wiese's looks too much like they're trying to be art and I think are confusing as such. Context and placement of work is primordial. If both Ontiveros' and Wiese's pieces are to be viewed as maquettes for larger more ambitious outdoor public projects then they are a success, if they are to be viewed as stand alone pieces they fail. One could easily see Ontiveros' border crossers in the thousands installed throughout downtown, running out of buildings, doorways, Horton Plaza, the Marina etc etc. This would be much more on par with and at the same level of impact illegal immigration is supposedly having on America. Perhaps this is what the artist intends to do some day, but as one piece in an art gallery with given 'x' amount of wall space to install it in; the work I feel comes off looking flaccid and too easy. The same criticism can be said of Wiese's signs, much too simple in their thought process and presentation. A sign or many signs attached to the outside of the Art Academy's building would I think, been a step in the right direction. (It's interesting to note Spanhake's work needing the gallery setting to survive as art - or otherwise it would just be a graffiti tag -while both Ontiveros and Wiese's works need the great outdoors to be effective and interpreted differently from what they're actually representing.)

Wiese's roadside panels with Holzer-esque cryptic meanings stencilled on them such as "Root Hog or Die" (an old adage meaning fend for yourself or die) and "Industry Need Not Want" were simply propped up leaning lazily against the wall. To what end?



"No. 1 (The Anchor Series)" - Chris Ferreria

The appropriation of "historical" imagery by any means necessary, and then digitally printed, silk-screened and otherwise reproduced on virtually any support, is quite common amongst contemporary artists these days. It's been awhile since anyone has seen or remembers the time Rauschenberg was using lithography and lighter fluid to transfer his iconography to canvas. While Rauschenberg was a master composer, organizing image with idea, composition with order, beauty with sensibility within the picture plane, he would in no way let one image prime over another, choosing instead harmony, intent and form. The digital and internet society we find ourselves living in has provided a plethora of "lost" and/or archival images usable and disposable at the touch of a keyboard - if it doesn't look good delete it. The fight and struggle has been taken out of the art making/decision process, the glory has been lost. It has gotten easier to copy/paste but it hasn't necessarily made the artwork any better.



"No. 2 (The Anchor Series)" - Chris Ferreria

Fellow San Diego artist R. Gleaves nailed it when he opined "Google is an art's best friend." But is it always an artist's best friend?

Chris Ferreria (www.uber.com/cnferreria) wants to answer that question I believe with a series of work entitled "The Anchor series" No.1 and No.2, digital prints on cotton fabric. Does Ferreria answer it or does he add to the cornucopia of gallery distilled works on paper or w.o.p.'s - an acronym I've heard used in various art circles. W.o.p.'s are stylistically characterized by the use of overly large pieces of paper, huge untouched surfaces that contain a relatively small object or image placed squarely at the bottom of the paper's edge either on the left, middle or right. The image Ferreria is using is a grouping of Navy cadets in training, circa World War II, wearing gasmasks or separately on another canvas firing a rifle. Loosely hinged on a flat backing, the canvases bleed out to the unframed edges, slightly wavy as they sit solemnly on the wall. Perhaps Ferreria's images are simply metaphoric anchors. A third image entitled "Upon Your Return to the Comfort of a Storm" is a large blurred close-up of the Battleship board game, its ships and plastic pegs in total disarray strewn about. Abstractly and compositionally intriguing, it is by far the best work out of the three images on view. Unfortunately, Ferreria's pieces in my opinion are the weakest link in the show.



"Upon Your Return to the Comfort of a Storm" - Chris Ferreria

Matt Devine (www.mattdevine.net) could ultimately place second with two works "Untitled", steel rods with patina and "Balance" Series, steel with patina. "Balance" is placed on a white pedestal that hugs the wall preventing any in-the-round appreciation and "Untitled" hangs flatly against the wall and does nothing more visually. Both works have a dark rich brown patina that interferes with the reading of the surface and in the case of "Untitled" disrupts the undulating surface of thick gage steel rods welded together side by side one after the other. Devine has simply created a wave pattern of alternating lengths of steel rod equal distance on both sides in some Rorschach steel menagerie that is static and formally dissatisfying. The work starts to break down as the rods start to thin out toward the extremities, pairing or tripling up showing the viewer the simplicity of the design and logic. "Balance" fares much better. Comprised of a conical cross section, sliced on the diagonal and turned on its side, a round circular hole has then been hollowed through the body of the piece slightly off center, creating a delicate "balance" of negative spaces and adding a Brancussi like flavour to the work. Much more formally appealing, "Balance" really can't be considered I believe, to be indicative of any contemporary sculpture being made today as the lessons Devine is trying to explore have been learned by many of his predecessors - Noguchi, Arp and Tony Smith for example - and have been resoundingly dealt with. I'm not saying Devine can't make this sort of work or shouldn't, of course not, what I'm saying is that it's not particularly at the forefront of setting any defining aesthetic. Once again, are these maquettes for larger public sculpture or models of formal contemplation? Robert Smithson once said that size determines what an object is; scale determines if it is art.



"Untitled" - Matt Devine



"Balance" Series - Matt Devine

If you're still reading this and if you've only gotten a glimpse of just a fraction of the works Nina Karavasiles (www.ninak.info) has exhibited at Simayspace, there are many more where that came from. All of them and I mean all, are splendid in their plurality and limitless imagination. You would do well to check out her website complete with an audio pronunciation of her first and last name - knee nah care a vasa less. This of course, is to see not only the breadth and range of work she's made but the apparent ease and comfort, the dexterity she exhibits in vacillating between public art, site-specific installations, private commissions, the studio, workshops and her design work which includes gardens, kitchens, bathrooms and jewellery. Karavasiles appears to be the most prolific and versatile artist in this group show creating work that is not only conceptually based but in tune with the site and specifics of each environment she's working in. She is also sensitive to the public art public needs of the community when she's been invited to create a sculpture within it, harmoniously integrating all the elements and requirements. Karavasiles work is far too vast to summarize and I am unable to do it justice in a small paragraph. The work shown at Simayspace was a collage of several public works she produced in collaboration with several architects and landscape artists amidst other designers, in achieving some of her past present and soon to be future projects. Some of these are: the recently installed "A San Diego African American Legacy", a proposal for the Colfax bridge that spans the LA river, the 70th Street Trolley Station, and "Recipe for Friendship" in San Diego's Little Italy. Just a few which are in reality, part of a dozen or so other projects she's successfully completed. I would hardly consider Karavasiles an emerging artist but could easily see her as the epitome of the Renaissance artist or sculptor for the King and State: a thinker, engineer, inventor, explorer, scientist but most of all a dreamer.



Nina Karavasiles



Nina Karavasiles

The "New Contemporaries" @ Simayspace - Part III

This is the third and final review of the "New Contemporaries" exhibit currently on view at the Simayspace Gallery, downtown San Diego.



"Paint #30" - Brad Streeper

Brad Streeper's (www.streeperart.com) paintings are brash, large unflinching pieces that are robust, solid and fought out on the wood panels they're painted on. Painted might be too romantic for the swirling orbs of material used to construct these abstract icons of solidified acrylic paint, gesso, glue and ink that create an aura of muted pastel colors bathed in faint reds and blues, charcoal blacks and titanium whites. The works are fluid by the nature of the materials used, poured on in layers of hide and seek washes, utilizing an all over approach to the surface often laying the panels on the floor. The effect is a topographical (maybe) satellite view of the land, sea or atmosphere.



"Paint #29, Paint #30" - Brad Streeper

The perspective and lack of a horizon line in Streeper's paintings allow the viewer an entry into the picture plane at any point and the freedom to explore and discover the painting's rich surface. It is a way of discovering his process and mark making from the first blob dropped to the poetic rhythm and beauty in its final state. It is obvious that Streeper is dedicated to his craft of pushing paint around and is

in this sense, arguably one of the best painters San Diego has to offer. That being said, it is also evident that he is following a long history of abstract painters and some very masterful Colourist (atmospheric) painters like J.M. Turner. I was not however, entirely bowled over by "Paint #29" and "Paint #30" and I feel this is where Streeper's process and physical application of the materials can sometimes clog what are normally veils of pure painting intuition and beauty. Streeper is still searching and we are thankful for that.



"Peculiar Velocity" - Lael Corbin

Lael Corbin (www.laelcorbin.com) has installed against one wall of the gallery a testing ground for an experiment he calls "Peculiar Velocity". Indeed there are some peculiar objects that are being readied for their maiden flight or should I say fall, and their rate of speed of that action - the tossing, dropping, throwing of these objects will be calculated, to what end is unknown as the experimentation appears to have stopped in mid-course. No one seems to be too concerned about the results though, a few calculations are scribbled on the wall, and sketches of a better design are notated while a few of the actual cast plaster models lie smashed upon the floor. Not that they had a chance of surviving intact since someone has intentionally placed a large square steel plate underneath the drop zone.

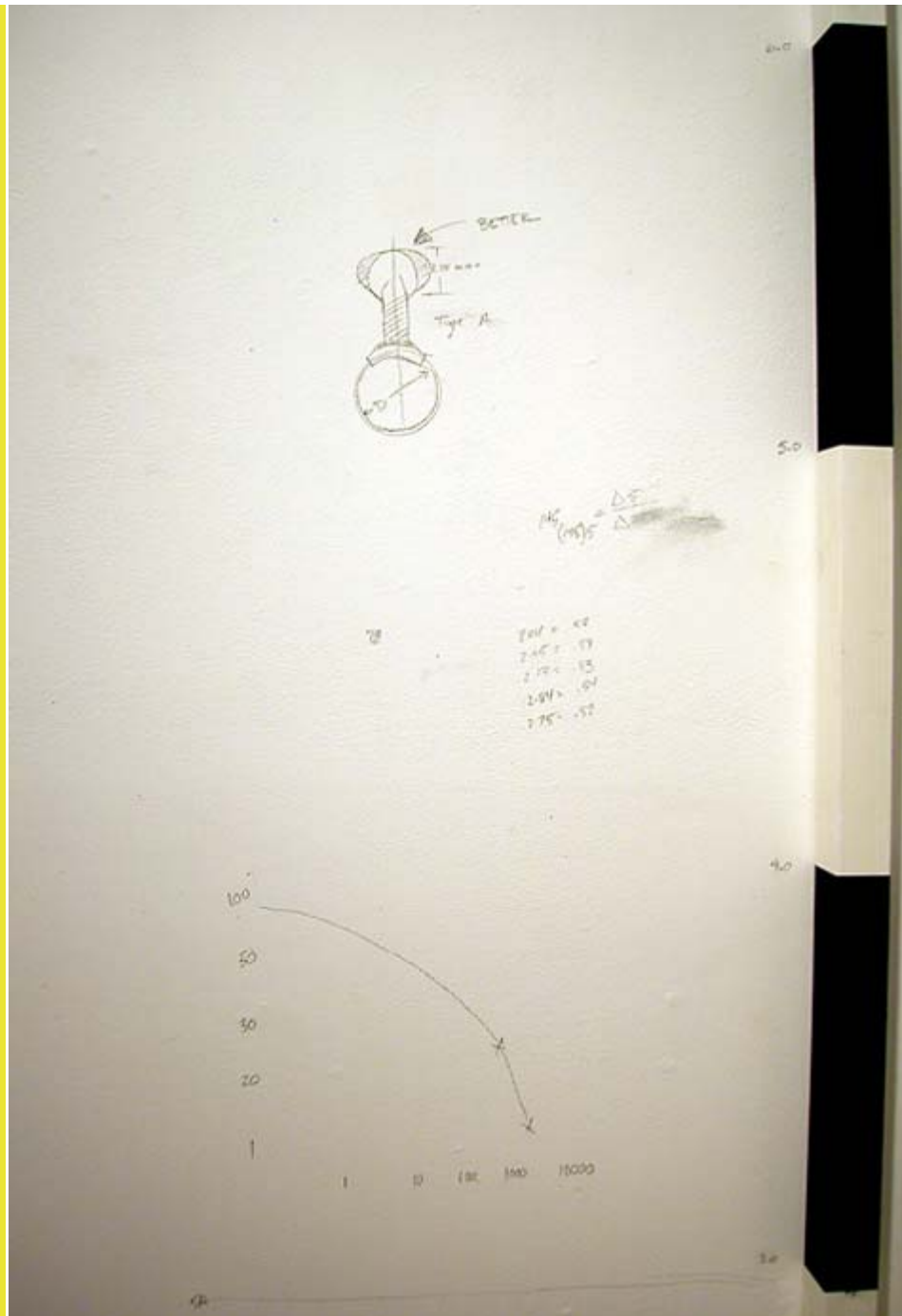


"Peculiar Velocity"(detail) - Lael Corbin



"Peculiar Velocity"(detail) - Lael Corbin

What we're not sure about is what these objects are meant to do and what their purpose is should they ever make it into production. The prototypes, cast in plaster look like they were moulded using the bottom of a small plastic container, bulging ever so slightly in the middle and then somewhat blunted at the top about the size of a thread spool - written on each is its weight. Are they eventually going to be transformed into weapons of mass destruction, hand grenades or shot-puts? Perhaps instead, Corbin's experiment is simply a lesson in futility, of dreams and experiments gone awry, hopes dashed, a childhood fantasy or an 8th grade science project unfinished. It certainly looks that way as a chair partially broken faces in towards the wall next to a long 8ft high measuring pole in black & white. What does a work like "Peculiar Velocity" mean you might ask, I can't say that I have an answer. It is indeed a peculiar piece, strangely quiet within the context of the show - unpretentious - and bashful about sharing the ideas it's trying to communicate.



"Peculiar Velocity"(detail) - Lael Corbin

Pamela Jaeger, (www.myspace.com/pamelajaeger) I've seen too much of her work in the last several months to be objective about it. Her successive log of shows is definitely over-exposure on an almost corporate level, galleries and independent spaces are saturated with her work and while it's relatively good painting it is more of the same.



Pamela Jaeger (click for larger image)

A good reference to the type of style Jaeger paints can be found at the [Copro Nason Gallery](#) in Santa Monica - Jaeger has exhibited there as well - which functions as a fine art publisher and gallery of the same genre self-described as a "mid-twentieth century 'pop' movement relative to Beatnik, Cad, Googie, Hodad, Kitsch and Surfdom." *If these names don't ring a bell*, the gallery continues, "how about Lowbrow, Hipster, Pin-Up or Outsider art." This is a phenomenon that has taken over and influenced a large number of younger artists today, corresponding I would say with the fairly recent comic book revival and film derivatives that had their popular roots 20 years ago when artists like Frank Miller, John Byrne and the granddaddy of them all RCrumb, changed the face of the comic book industry for good.

Jaeger's paintings are generally modest in scale, painted in a classic figure-foreground composition, typically portraits of women with generic faces and changing hairstyles, often in Victorian style gowns and/or "boudoir" lingerie - they want to be like Marie-Antoinette but all the decadence and steamy sex has been left out. Jaeger has created a saccharin world of blueberries, raspberries and strawberries, pink and blue cotton candy, cats, dogs, butterflies, bubbles, daffodils, pink and violent roses and Pixy Sticks for her heroines to exist in. Characteristically without emotion, Jaeger's women (self-portraits?) stare blankly at their audience, the heavy theatrical make-up they wear further distances any reading or entry into their private lives or any clues as to why these women are being portrayed in the first place. Like a series of paper cut-out dolls, you can readily change an outfit, the play-house or the accessories creating endless possibilities of imaginary worlds, dreams and tales. And herein lies the rub, its Tele-Tubbies for the masses. If the efforts of the artist have been solely concentrated on a limited stylistic change and pictorial vocabulary through the use of very universal and un-personal imagery, then the focus of the spectator is going to forcibly look to the figurines for clues and direction - but there is none. There is no sense or content beyond the pastel picture plane despite any real or imagined experiences, beliefs, fantasies, hopes that the artist believes she is trying to imbue into the paintings via the figure. The over-whelming production and mass exposure of the work only tells us that there is more where this came from.



"Paullly Small Eyes" - Andy Howell

I was barely 20 years old in 1989, the year [Andy Howell](http://www.andyhowell.com) (www.andyhowell.com) became a professional skateboarder. I was born and raised in Santa Cruz, CA and had spent my earlier years riding some of the first fibreglass skateboards produced by a local surfboard maker in Capitola. I was never very good, suffering two broken collarbones and many a skinned knees and elbows - but I had fun. I even remember graduating up to a Hang Ten board with polyurethane wheels and sealed bearings, and attempting a ride in the next door neighbour's empty pool.

WOW! times have changed to say the least, as the skateboard industry and its skaters have become one of the most influential cultural icons of the 21st century. Money talks and bullshit walks as they say and quick tour of the internet to get some industry stats led me to the International Association of Skateboard Companies (http://www.skateboardiasc.org/industry_stats.asp) who quoted annual sales volume for 2004 at \$5.2 billion. But it isn't all about money as skateboarding has entered all aspects of social and cultural life from art to fashion to design and beyond, its religious fervour and "way of life" has changed a whole generation of youth in America and abroad. It is also difficult to know who had first bragging rights to the artistic pole of this movement, were the Lowbrow artists just a natural extension of the skate and surf culture that has been around for generations or did they arrive from the renaissance of the Tattoo industry or did they see an opportunity to mass market their designs and bizarre imagery on every skateboard deck in the world? Or did the skaters and surfers suddenly realize they had some artistic talent to offer? What this has to do with Howell is everything, since he fully epitomizes the entrepreneurial spirit in skateboarding and being an artist. He is his very own "House," a trademark and landmark production company, managed, packaged and delivered to the eager masses with razor sharp marketing skills. Image is everything in his world. Howell much like Nina Karavasiles, are two artists that have seamlessly turned their professional careers and life into art. And in doing so, I fail to see why Howell would even be considered for the show, and it's not because he's a terrible artist, but because his status as "emerging" in the context of the selection process seems ridiculous and maybe even just a little insulting. The only reason I can think of is that we're making a distinction between his "fine art" production and his "commercial" production - which seems equally as absurd. Or is it simply about name recognition, if so, the focus is once again being pulled away from the art on view.



"Portrait of Missipi Red" - Andy Howell

Howell's work in "New Contemporaries" is comprised of several mounted cut-out silhouetted heads, like some rack of safari trophies hanging in some big game hunter's den, but instead of animals, they're crooked cops and small time crooks. Are these awards being given to their perspective owners for loyal and dedicated service, perseverance in robbing liquor stores and racketeering or have they been given out post-mortem? - hard to tell but I suspect they no longer have a say in their future careers. "Snubnose", "43 Years of Serviss" (purposely misspelled because this is how gangsters talk), Paully Small Eyes" are just some of the more light-hearted pieces Howell has created. I'm guessing that these works might be a drop in the bucket for him, view all the projects he is involved in, and probably shouldn't be read into more than what they are - comical. They're nicely done and well conceived, but if you're looking for more "serious" work, check out his website(s) and his new book, "Art, Skateboarding and Life." (<http://www.andyhowell.com/demo.html>)



"My Beautiful Wife" (self-portrait) - Alida Cervantes

Alida Cervantes (http://www.ijonline.com/GaleriaHH/english/cervantes_eng/cervantes_galeria_eng.html) exhibits a large scale painting entitled "My Beautiful Wife (self-portrait)" a beautiful, compelling and richly seductive work that captures the viewer's attention the moment you walk into the gallery. From what I've managed to gather off the internet, Cervantes is a Tijuana based artist, born here in San Diego from Mexican parents and she deals with issues of "identity" in her paintings. Rumour has it that Cervantes, apparently of fair complexion, was often told that she didn't "look" Mexican. This led her to investigate and question what identity really is, creating a body of work where she portrays herself in various social and class distinctive or stereotypical culture and race typecasting scenarios. Similar I would say to the work Cindy Sherman has produced in photographs over the years. I'm sure this is all useful information and can only help us to better understand Cervantes work, however with one work in the show, it is at best difficult to "see" all those issues of identity within the work. Do they exist or does the painting need to be in a larger context of similar works accompanied by an essay? Artwork seldom lies. I like this painting a lot for other reasons than "identity;" does this mean that I've missed the intent and message of the artist? Or it doesn't matter because it is simply art and open to a multitude of interpretations? Shouldn't we just let the painting speak for itself? Again, these are debates that come up in group shows but isn't it a bit misleading for the viewer who comes to the work seeing it for the first time? If we can justify in words what we can't do in paint, why paint? Otherwise, Cervantes' painting could easily be a portrait of just about anybody. Race should not be a criteria for making good art, translating what we believe about ourselves into that art is all we have - we have no other language available.

Why paint? may not be an issue for Cervantes on a most basic level of expression and her desire to move the oily substance around on canvas. It is only because she does it quite well with a lot of bravado and bold confident strokes of the brush. Cervantes' large painted head looms almost bobs up and down before the viewer, filling up the majority of the canvas. Her shoulder length hair, pulled back with a cotton bandana exposes her large forehead and high cheek bones, framing her smiling face in dark brown and black thick brush strokes curling upwards ever so slightly as it brushes against her brightly colored floral summer dress. Reminiscent of some of Alex Katz's works in their frontal composition and cropping, Cervantes' painting is however, not as flat and as monochrome as Katz's as she weaves into her rich surfaces an almost hot fluorescent palette of colors balanced by cooler blues and violets to define shape and three dimensionality. Her suburban housewife appeal and purity is rather unnerving because she is well.. so bubbly and happy to see us, or is it because she's an American?

The last three artists in the show, Tristan Shone (www.oleblue.com), Nina Waisman (www.ninawaisman.net), and Tania Candiani (<http://www.cronika.com/taniacandiani/index.htm>) are non-emerging artists who have had various successes and recognition by the art establishment or have managed their careers on a national and international level. Candiani for being "selected" as an emerging artist in the context of this show, has a very impressive resume and collection pedigree already of work owned by: the Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla "Avidéz"; San Diego Museum of Art, San Diego "El Novio y La Novia"; Alberta Du Pont Foundation, La Jolla "All the emotion..."; Centro Cultural Tijuana, Tijuana, B.C. "La Equilibrante"; and The Great American Women's Sculpture Park, NY "Compulsive Eater" to name but a few. Candiani was born in 1974 in Mexico City and according to her website, lives and works in Tijuana; she is autodidact.



"Plays of Pleasure. Mattresses Series" - Tania Candiani

At first view, Candiani's work can appear to be rather dark and cynical, uncomfortable, violent all the way from the physical process in making the work to its painful conclusions. In "New Contemporaries" Candiani presents a light-box installation constructed out of plexiglass, fluorescent tubes and digital prints on paper entitled "Plays of Pleasure" from the Mattresses Series which I'm supposing is part of her Domestic Series. Domesticity is quite the buzz word for a lot of artists here and abroad, often using installation and sculpture (loosely) and incorporating embroidery into the process of their art making - usually in red. A recent exhibition at the Art Produce Gallery of recent undergraduate work from UCSD, elicits yet another body of work around sexual identity and the taboo use of the word cunt. Does this prove my theory to be 100% fallible, of course not. What it does say is the issues of domesticity, sex, pornography, gender roles, work et al treated by some of San Diego's younger women artists, alongside art history's subjective non-recognition of under exposed and under appreciated women artists working quietly in New York during the male dominated atmosphere of Abstract Expressionism and much later, the feminist

revolution in the late 60's and early 70's that woke everyone up to the art that truly was some of the best, is little consulted by this current generation, neglected, forgotten or is stolen at face value and turned into art as such. The symbols, clichés, performances and shock imagery of the past - used with much more precision, depth and intellect (sensitivity) by women and in tune with a real necessity to awaken their slumbering male counterparts into higher consciousness - is now being exploited and misrepresented by a water downed simulacra of artwork that appropriates but no longer distills.



"Plays of Pleasure. Mattresses Series(detail)" - Tania Candiani

Too harsh? Perhaps. But I have a low tolerance in my subjective objective points of view on work of this nature. I have the same feelings about some of the homoerotic works being produced these days, not because it is "disdainful" or "offensive" or "morally corrupt" to use any number of society's stereotypical misreading and keywords for its banishment, but because it rarely moves beyond the graphic content and surface imagery. At the end of the day, a penis is a penis, a vagina a vagina and sex is sex. Celebrate it, i.e. show us something different. Does Candiani's work fall into this categorization I've deduced or is this one work in a group show that is pure documentation of a larger body of work? I believe that it is the latter. But if you put work out there for public viewing, then you accept the responsibility of criticism and potential self-imposed misrepresentation of your work and take the risk that it has already been done - mined - before yours. Or should this be the curator's responsibility to keep work out of a show that does not totally assume its role or is a tired metaphor?

That being said, Candiani's "Plays of Pleasure" is a literal juxtaposition of separated images laid out horizontally, of embroidered white balloons held in place by holes in a grid in which they were blown through. Each balloon has a stitched word on it in red that makes up the following phrase: "Pain is a justification of pleasure". The word "justification" has been altered to read "ju-fist-ication". Up above the series of images, rests a lone image of a hand holding a dart. Perhaps pain is a truism for pleasure for some, maybe a hard line reality for others when it becomes domestic violence and likely a final resting place for still others - when they have become sadly, victims of Honor killings. Are all women victims in Candiani's world? It certainly seems that way or they must have some very strong religious (upbringing) and matrimonial obligations they must fulfil or are being forced to fulfil. This can be seen in other embroidered works from the Domestic Series, stitched directly into bedroom mattresses like painted Zero's on the side of a P-40 Mustang. They recite rather robotically, pleading or reluctantly providing expressions of love, pleasure and sex - 'yes', 'no', 'in', 'out', 'don't stop' sometimes little plastic cherries are weaved into the surface just to make sure we "get" the intended message. Unfortunately, there is nothing to get as these works are powerful for their risqué presentation and biting commentary maybe, but in the end and if it is what John Cage once opined that "It's the artist's role to change the world," then these works have offered no plausible plan of attack or hope for a better future. Are we not as responsible for recognizing a problem as we are irresponsible for not doing anything about it? Do I need an artist to tell me what that problem is? I'm not so sure. Why the disconnect from reality? What reality you ask, how about women's rights in India, Iran, Iraq and China, female circumcision in the UK, rape in Africa - a vagina and arse so ripped apart that you can't control bodily functions or keep your intestines from coming out the hole, and so on ad nauseum. All artists should take the responsibilities of art making and not try to teach us lessons unless they're willing to learn from them themselves! If Candiani's work is a call to arms to stop the violence, then it needs to reach a larger public where it can do some good beyond the sanctity of the gallery walls.

On a lighter note, Candiani's "Protección Familiar: helmets" Series (not in the show) of women sporting metal strainers on their heads with chin straps are much more effective and direct to this viewer. They are filtered, fresh and original.



"Drone Machines 4 Rotary Encoder" - Tristan Shone

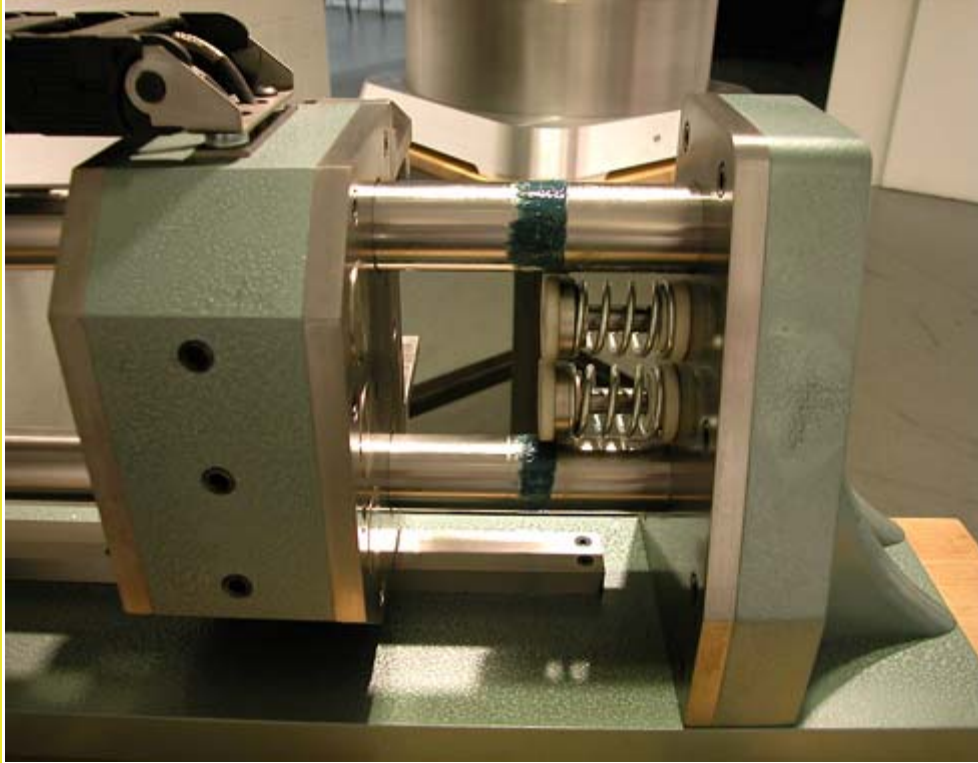
Tristan Shone (from his website) has a BS in Mechanical Engineering from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, NY and is seeking a MFA from UCSD with an emphasis on robotics and automation. Between January 2005 and May 2006, Shone worked on a project called Aphanisis - a psychoanalytic term coined by Ernest Jones (a psychiatrist who introduced psychiatry to the U.K. in the early 20th century), whose symptoms are described as the disappearance of sexual desire. Shone's Aphanisis was designed to "automate a bioMEMS chip filling and handling process reworked to overpower the chips. Addresses issues of sexual repression and unintuitive restraint in the clean lab." I'm not quite sure what bioMEMS chips are or what they do, but how can you knock a guy who thinks like that. Did I mention the research he's doing at the National Center for Microscopy and Imaging Research, "developing and testing robotic algorithms for achieving Eurocentricity within a new state of the art, high resolution electron microscope? Including work in mechanical design and fabrication." I could go on but I think you get the point; Shone has some serious credentials and experience.



"Drone Machines 3 Linear Actuator" - Tristan Shone

But that's not all. Shone has collaborated on several projects as engineer, programmer, designer and was notably, part of inSITE 2005 with Ricardo Dominguez and Coco Fusco in fabricating a USA-Mexico border video game that was installed in the Tijuana Zapatista headquarters. He is also an artist, a musician (the type of industrial sound from what I've read in various reviews, has been compared to Trent Reznor's) who's stage name is Author & Punisher and most recently, has been designing and fabricating what he calls "Drone Machines." I'll let him describe what they are, "For the past year I have been designing and hand fabricating industrial sound sculptures or interface devices titled *Drone Machines*. They are meant to be performed with at least for a time allowing one to experience the connection of the sound and hardware design. With durability and quality in industrial components ranging from robotics and automation all the way to older hand tools and musical instruments, these machines are meant to last and carry great weight and potential." If you read the description of one of these machines it sounds like the latest publicity for Mercedes-Benz.

Drone Machines1: THROTTLES: dual throttle bass controller - 100in.lb torque provided by servo motor output per axis - pitch output by quadrature encoder on motors - volume output by potentiometer on handle - current dial readout - midi out and control by atmel microcontroller - air cooled [anodized aluminium, maple, stainless steel, electronics]



"Drone Machines 3 Linear Actuator(detail)" - Tristan Shone

And a Mercedes-Benz these beauties are, "Drone Machines 3" and "Drone Machines 4" shown in this exhibit are stunning to look at - polished steel and aluminium, bearings, optical linear and rotary encoders, exotic woods, the stuff of science fiction and space travel, of great feats of engineering and technology, of fantasy - of Mice and Men when they're not functioning. So what do industrial sound sculptures do when they're not making noise and Shone isn't at the controls? - they're sittin' pretty and awfully quiet. And this is really too bad for the importance of the work's integrity and understanding (functioning), but for the visitor (unless he's already familiar with Shone's work) as well. I believe there was one performance set aside, but if you missed it like I did, or didn't even know about it and just showed up in the gallery the next day, I'm betting that you would simply read these pieces as engineered objects, handcrafted maybe, sculpture probably, but certainly industrially fabricated in the vein of some of Judd's pieces and not know what they do - despite all their implied mobility. And you would have been wrong. Shone's website has a sound video of a Drone Machines performance, that only gives you a hint of what I'm sure it would be like to experience it in Surround Sound.



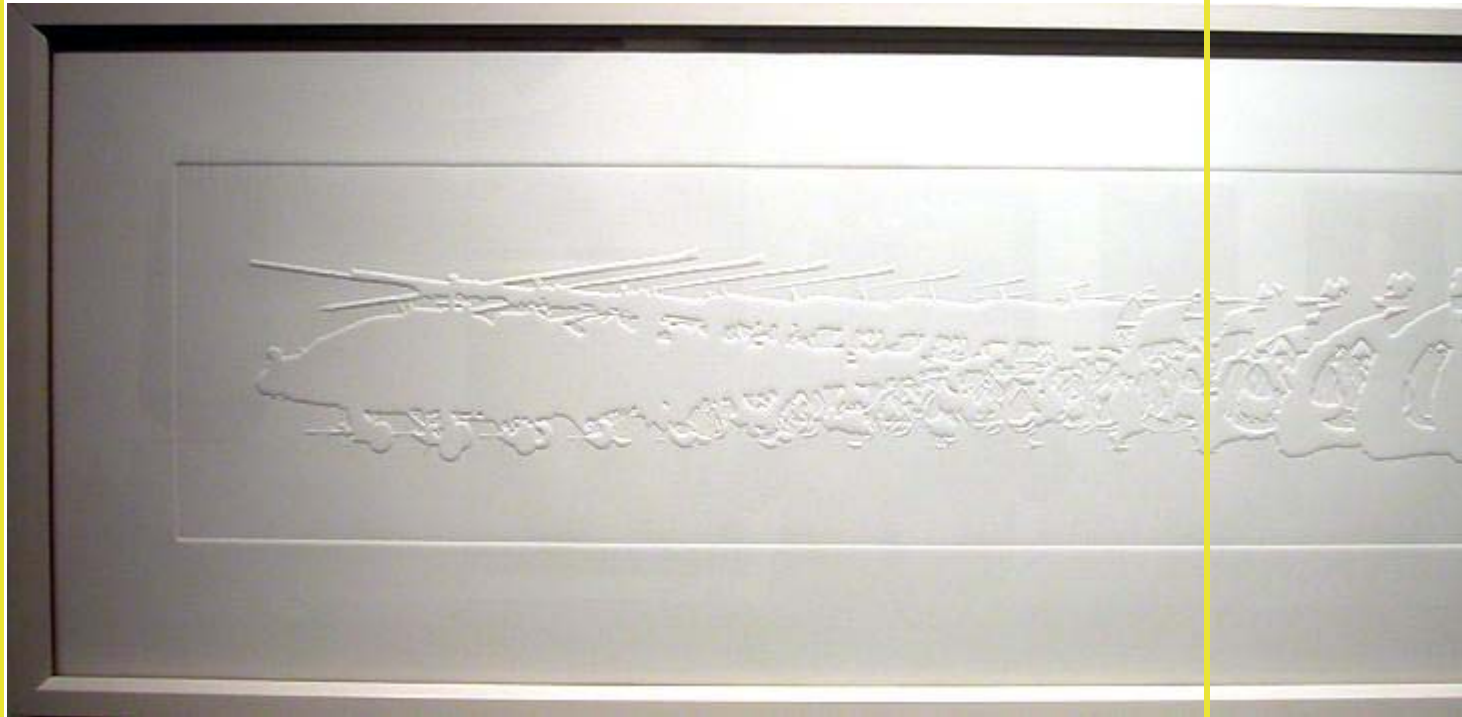
"Drone Machines 3 Linear Actuator(detail)" - Tristan Shone

I believe it is a tremendous disservice to the work and the audience, to assume that the bulk of an artwork or machine does something without seeing it function, not to mention that it is in sharp contrast to his mission statement to, "*physically manoeuvre about the control room backed by 7000 watts of sound, reaching deep into the innards where wood and steel join as flesh and bone.*" Would it not have been more informative if they're had been an ongoing video projection or regularly scheduled performances or even schematics to accompany the display of the work? At least something...



"Apache Attack Helicopter Becomes Buddy" - Nina Waisman

And finally, Nina Waisman presents a very rich subtle almost minimal-esque presentation of a series entitled "Apache Attack Helicopter becomes Buddy" on luxurious white velvety smooth embossed paper - by use of a die. Exquisite works that are inspired by her very own mascot and imaginary friend "Buddy." They draw the viewer in and caress them with a rhythmic shedding (la mue) of metal wings, armour and propellers into a rolling Play-Doh like figurine or Michelin Tire Man with impressive Optimus Prime transformations and speed - OR are simply "tracing the connection between 2 markers of an historical zeitgeist," says Waisman. Buddy "first showed up as a calligraphic painting, but that 2-d, on-the-wall gig got tight. Butting into the 3d world, Buddy has been done up in day-glo acrylic as part of the Buddy-to-Buddha I Ching Game, travelled to Iraq, to Target, to murder scenes, to beds and to baths. Buddy has been worshipped, hidden, carved in wood, cast in aluminium, sewn up as soft-sculpture in leatherette and silk, and might appear in bubblegum-form some day soon. Some Buddies are mass-produced, some are virtual and some handmade limited editions, painstakingly created one-by-one. You can make Buddy into whatever you want: Buddy is easy." And fun I might add.



"Apache Attack Helicopter Becomes Buddy"(detail) - Nina Waisman (click for larger image)

But much like her previous colleagues, Waisman is far from being an emerging artist and has attained a level of maturity, thought and process not seen much these days. With beginnings at Harvard University, B.A. Magna Cum Laude to an exhibition career spanning 15 years, she is hardly an artist in the making. Her work(s) much too vast and conceptually smart to outline here in a few brief paragraphs, are like Karavasilis, imbued with a range and dexterity - depth - that involves many mediums but primarily sound installations. Whereas Shone is the sole contributor and player in his sound performances, Waisman actively seeks out and requires audience participation to make her work speak - often documenting the results and actions/inactions and/or responses of the willing albeit trepid trespasser on video. The results are well documented, clean, succinct and fascinating to watch, you are immediately caught up in the ballet like movements and performance of orchestrated randomness.



"Apache Attack Helicopter Becomes Buddy"(detail) - Nina Waisman

"Displacement" and "Around" are two installation sound pieces that Waisman describes as, "modular interactive floor-tile-speaker systems of 'displacement' so that I might pursue a variety of sound and choreographic experiences working with the simple act of walking. Each iteration is site-specific, allowing for ongoing experiments with soundplay and choreography. Future iterations will have visitors' footsteps trigger non-walking sounds - concrete sound that might suggest connections/impact on distant events." In short, you have to walk upon these interactive floor tiles or pass by sensors, which can be hidden or intermingled with other objects, to have what Waisman explains is "an interest in Deleuze & Guattari's proposal that sound play - chromatics, as they call it - might eventually push language towards a 'beyond of language'". Sound play. Perfect! I highly recommend viewing the video of "Quinine" (no relation I suspect to the wonder drug for the cure of malaria) but nonetheless, the "Quinine: Rough Dance Improv" segment with dancer Matt Johnstone on video is spectacular.

So what have I learned? And what do I still have questions about? Let me preface this by saying all criticism I'm logging here is to bring the attention of the gallery visitor and the reader back onto the art on the walls and to open up a debate on the current artistic scene in San Diego. Why do I think this is necessary? It is because I believe what is lacking is some form of consistent "defining moments" from San Diego's artists, curators, galleries, museums and art press. There are pockets of resistance from galleries and artists working here that have established themselves independently from any support or lack of, they have received. This is a credit to their perseverance and individual visions but I'm not sure San Diego has enough to offer them in terms of say, a larger collector base, retrospective shows, an art fair, cultural centers, state and city support (grants, public & private foundations, public sculpture, studio space etc.), a gallery center (Ray at Night isn't exactly what I would call a "cultural Mecca"), to keep anyone of them here beyond their years at a University - which usually coincides with the pursuit of a M.F.A. and what to do afterwards. There are to my point of view, no one artist or gallery that is looked to or sought after that is creating a personal vision or movement that defines a trend that the San Diego Art Prize committee is so desperately trying to create. But you can't knock them for trying.

It is easier to understand why artists and galleries choose to live and work in San Diego if you understand I think what the reasons are that they stay, meaning how are they using what they have to their advantage. I'm certainly not pretending that I know ALL the reasons, but I use it to illustrate my point as to why there is a certain (minimal) level of quality within the art being made here, the ampler of work being shown in the museums (i.e. why didn't the Dan Flavin retrospective travel to San Diego?) and the general lack of attention art receives by the public, its newspaper and its galleries - it is because it is only a railroad stop on a route to a much more attractive destination - the art world. Sea, Sex and Sun, the Padres, the Gaslamp and a multi-million dollar tourist and hotel industry sums up the priorities San Diego has beyond the obvious lack of any art infrastructure and city budget to support the arts. This is why we get what we get. And yes, I've read plenty of articles where critics have pointed out the errant gesticulations of "why San Diego isn't an art city" by those who have questioned its vitality and future, that have us all convinced in the end that it is simply not so. But why make art here in San Diego and if you do, what are the goals in doing so beyond just showing it? This convinces no one that there is something to be seen.

So, I believe you can view the "New Contemporaries" as an example of this temporality, as a single endeavour organized by a group of private individuals who felt it was necessary to award excellence to artists living and working here. Fine. This would however, go a long way in explaining the random and non-representative selection of the work, the lack of information about the artists - other than going to their websites, the choice of exhibition space and the confusion about who is established and who isn't - since it was one of the premises for organizing the exhibition in the first place. This shouldn't be some "dog and pony show" where artists have to compete against one another for a coveted prize that other than some money and an exhibit at the Omni Hotel, is destined to show us what? Artists can show together? It is this level of expertise by the established consensus and their implied nuggets of promised wisdom and/or insight bequeathed upon those who are chosen (it's difficult to ignore a certain "judge and jury" mentality), that disturbs me the most. The fact that you are establishing a hierarchy of power and selecting from a limited gene pool proves what? What it proves is that you don't need to fill in the blanks for those who come visit these exhibitions, because if you're already in the loop, well you're in the loop. The details aren't necessary because the reasons for doing it are not about the art. So what are those reasons? And where did this desire arise from? Was it because they (the organizers) felt something was lacking or is it a simple case of "need is the mother of invention?" But what is that need, what is lacking here in San Diego that I don't know about and am willing to help satisfy and build upon?

Kevin Freitas

