Artistic echoes in hallowed halls

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

By Josef Woodard,
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"Art Alumni Invitational"
Where: 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: 855-0581, 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.

More precise, and more to one point of the exhibition, these former SBCC students didn’t exactly traipse 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 narrating artistic voice to boast. Among the areas of the show is the freshness of the art as well as artists who have migrated to other cities, from New York (Jules de Balincourt) to San Francisco (Madeleine Touzi, Cal Voller-Dixon) 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 Bormolazzo, whose work has often been shown in Sullivan Goss (including a recent show there). A protégé of famed kinetic sculptor George Rickey, Mr. Bormolazzo 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. Voller-Dixon’s large faux-fueling aluminum and mylar “Flag.” The reflective silver flag, devoid of identifying colors or designs, flies in the face of the nationalistic and pride-implying 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 if 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 gungy white contribution from some dream factory where fears and childhood imaginations ramble.

On more conventional turf — in a largely unconventional and conceptually peered selection in this show — Mimi 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 subtletest. Jessica Mei Flemming’s “900 Yards,” a squiggle-festive monoprint tapestry laid out episodically on multiple sheets, harnesses visual energies and contrasts of density versus void, 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. Touzi’s “Cyclical Yearning” is less upfront than it seems on first impact, A stylized and semi-cartoonish play on 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 daddish eco-sing in its pictorial tack. Yearning, as in what we in rate-depicted Southern California are immersed in, is an important clue to the underlying meaning of the image.

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