

Formal Boundaries Take Some Life From 'Biennial'

March 02, 1999 | CATHY CURTIS | TIMES STAFF WRITER

Many commentators have observed that the smartest recent art emphasizes formal values and real-life connections while avoiding the tortuous obscurities of academic conceptual work. For the most part, the energy is going into finding fresh visual metaphors. But--for better and worse--some legacies of Minimal and conceptual art die hard.

An alert visitor to the Orange County Museum of Art's 1999 "Biennial" can't help but notice the methodical approach of some of these California artists in their 20s and 30s. Self-imposed systems for cataloging real-world data (Ingrid Calame's organization of stain patterns found on city streets) and computer-aided design (Steve Crique's still-lives) threaten to make the notion of improvisation and "happy accidents" in art a distant memory.

While such methods are sometimes fruitful (as in the paintings of Monique Prieto, seen in the last "Biennial"), they can lock artists into a tensely predetermined, overcautious approach.

All the playful vigor of Crique's earlier work has drained away in his paintings of ultra-flat, ever-so-slightly awkward vase and jug forms floating in space. These are wan efforts, too transparently simplistic to register even as lite Pop mutations of the richly tactile originals: 17th century Dutch still-lives.

Similarly, there is something prissily bloodless about Calame's painstaking translation of messy urban spills into the unremarkable pale green abstract patterns of "sspsps . . . UM biddle BOP."

The 10 artists in this show, selected by museum chief curator Bruce Guenther, are overwhelmingly, though not exclusively, concerned with formal rather than social values. The work nonetheless represents a baffling range of efforts: inventive to inept, bravura to bland. What Jeremy Kidd's indigestible abstractions, Jim Rogeberg's ponderous quasi-science experiment and Laurie Reid's self-effacing watercolors are doing here is anyone's guess.

Among the Los Angeles artists, Jaci den Hartog, Michelle Fierro and Kevin Appel make the strongest showing.

Den Hartog's three-dimensional variations on classic Chinese landscape painting include "Passing a Pleasant Summer II," a waxy frozen river that appears to gush from the wall and wind its way around empty space. This tour de force of imaginative reconstruction obliges the viewer to mentally fill in the unseen rocks. "The View to the West," with its towering arched rocks balanced on a nubby, gumdrop-colored terrain, mingles two kinds of fantasy: the geologic wonder and the Western fairy-tale kingdom.

Seen from a distance, Fierro's canvases evoke an anarchic blend of roiling landscapes and mysterious activity zones. Up close, the paintings break apart into their constituent parts: bits and bobs of studio debris, paper, paint squirts and furtive graphite sketches. Descendants of Cy Twombly with a post-Pop edge, at once tough and tender, these richly visual works look as though they were achieved with effortless panache.

Appel's paintings are designed to flip back and forth between decorative surface effects and the evocation of airily minimal domestic interiors. Clean-edged slabs of radiant, whitened color and subtly textured shades of white demarcate windows and structural elements. Delicate clouds of tiny superimposed triangles that appear to turn in space (denoting trees or potted plants) add a welcome vivacity to these works, which bathe immaculate architecture in the gauzy glow of reverie.

The most notable local debut is that of Kathryn Spence, a San Francisco artist whose work has not been seen before in Southern California. Her untitled "mud animals" are two bear-like creatures, one sitting up woozily on the floor, the other, larger one, lying heavily on its side.

Made of old stuffed animals and bathrobes, rolled in mud, these are exhausted-looking creatures with swollen limbs and dark, porous skins. They have an elemental aura recalling the work of Magdalena Abakanowicz as well as a specifically social presence. The creatures' quasi-human presence somehow evokes viewers' mingled feelings of pity, helplessness and distaste when confronted with inert members of the underclass.

Spence's untitled installation of pigeons made from bits of cloth, waterlogged paper and string eerily conjures the windy desolation of a city street. Pecking at the ground in ragged groups or standing in motionless isolation, these urban scavengers are themselves made from scavenged materials: a cycle of glum making-do.

Fellow San Franciscan Kim Anno makes an auspicious local debut with shield-like paintings. In the best ones, ranks of broad, flat brush strokes push their way across the wood panel, petering out abruptly ("Linger") or twisting to one side and butting against another row of stripes ("Errant"). In contrast to the subdued color harmonies, the brush strokes' palpable tension and release resonate in gratifyingly full-bodied ways.

* 1999 "Biennial," through May 9 at the Orange County Museum of Art, 850 San Clemente Drive, Newport Beach. Closed Mondays. (949) 759-1122.