Art Reviews

Alices Visit Alternate Realities in 'Hard-Boiled Wonderland'

June 15, 2001 | CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT | TIMES ART CRITIC

From Stanton Macdonald-Wright to John McLaughlin, artists working in Los Angeles during the past hundred years have regularly been drawn toward incorporating aspects of traditional Asian art into their own work. "Hard-Boiled Wonderland," an unusually strong group show at Cal State L.A.'s Luckman Gallery, looks at the continuing relevance of the phenomenon in the work of five current practitioners.

According to a gallery brochure, the show's title comes from a novel by Japanese writer Haruki Murakami, in which the protagonist immerses himself in an alternative reality that eventually merges with his own. In the exhibition, that idea goes in several directions.

Jacci den Hartog and Tom Knechtel are established mid-career artists whose sculptures and paintings (respectively) have approached aspects of traditional Chinese landscape art and principles of Hindu mysticism.

Den Hartog's polyurethane and plaster sculptures of fantastic mountain ranges and swirling rivers are at once clunky and elegant, abstract and descriptive. They are especially effective cantilevered from the white gallery wall, a witty means of support that becomes a surrogate for the meditative, misty expanse common to Den Hartog's Chinese landscape source.

Knechtel's eloquent drawings--water buffalo, elephant and monkey--and exquisitely refined oil painting on linen, "My Lingam," fuse a sense of devotion reminiscent of medieval manuscript illumination with a distinctly different embrace of worldly substance. They are sensual in the extreme.

Sandeep Mukherjee also takes advantage of an ethereal eroticism familiar from some Indian art, which he strips down in an almost Minimalist way. Contour-drawn self-portraits of his head or body floating through aqueous space are made with pale colored-pencil and needle pricks in flesh-like vellum. Think celestial tattoos--a refined dreaminess arrived at through pain.

Movie posters form the ground for large-scale collages by Joseph Lee. Stippled color in geometric swirls and patterns, sometimes spelling out incongruous words, obliterate the surface. The marking, which is said to derive from Thai traditions, reads as a means for personalizing (by overwhelming) a mass culture idiom. But the patterns often seem random, indifferent to the particularities of the poster-ground, which is finally self-defeating.

"Hard-Boiled Wonderland" also marks the debut of Gajin Fujita, whose elaborate fusions of street-tagging and Japanese graphic design are high-energy highlights of the exhibition. Fujita can turn a stylized tiger into an urban animal of dangerous beauty, simultaneously sexy, silly and sublime. In his sprayed, gold-leafed and painted acrylic panels, conventions collide in luxuriously productive ways.

* Luckman Gallery, Cal State L.A., 5151 State University Drive, (323) 343-6610, through July 7. Closed Fridays and Sundays.

Color-Coded: Color put to almost architectonic ends links the three otherwise disparate painters in a group show at Goldman Tevis Gallery. New York-based Torben Giehler and Yeardley Leonard use color as building blocks, while London-based Rachel Howard uses stretched canvas as a wall-like surface for chromatic display. In each, color is exploited for its useful resistance to language.

Howard pours paint in wide swaths that bump up against one another, blurring boundaries. Akin to the technique mastered in the 1960s by Morris Louis, Howard's dense pours shun the ostensible seriousness of that era's Color-field painting. Her tropical hues--lime, orange, ruby and fuchsia--are not purist primaries, while her thick, glossy, light-reflective paint recalls nothing so much as fingernail polish. Sultry surface glamour goes a long way here.

Giehler and Leonard use geometric color shapes to build their images. Loosely recalling the work of Ron Davis, Giehler's topographic paintings are rather like urban maps. Schematic buildings rise up eccentrically from a rationalist grid. Light and shadow, rendered in crisp, clear acrylic, seem as tangible yet remote as a skyscraper.

Leonard's paintings are the most complex and rewarding. Narrow, horizontal bands of layered color are stacked in such a way that the canvas seems to be divided in three, like a traditional triptych. A thin band of turquoise blue will travel from left to right across two "panels," finally ending where a fat aqua band on the third "panel" starts. Your eye drops down to the next register, then slides from right to left on a fleshy pink band, eventually dead-ending into another hue, and so on. The pictures feel woven together.

Visually, you read Leonard's canvases almost as you would a book, scanning and accumulating information in bits, but without a prescribed order. The result, more like digital than print information, is an uncanny sense of dense solidity, assembled only from a contradictory fusion of line and color.

* Goldman Tevis Gallery, 932 Chun King Road, Chinatown, (213) 617-8217, through June 30. Closed Sundays through Tuesdays.

Life in the Big City: In a sweet, openhearted body of work at the UCLA/Hammer Museum, San Francisco-based artist Chris Johanson proposes generosity, willingness and humanity as palliatives to the ordinary brutalities of modern life. Determination, not naivete, seems to fuel him.

Rural simplicity meets urban chaos in Johanson's installation. A river made from a painted strip of wood flows out from a big cardboard mountain in the gallery lobby. At the gallery's glass wall, the stream is transformed into a car-clogged highway. A lone, peaceful paddler in a canoe contrasts with an array of drivers--some consumed with road rage, a few humming along with the radio, and others just minding their own business.

The highway leads to a store made from a large, painted plywood box. "Nice Store," reads the sign painted on the building, followed by an unlikely commercial slogan: "The Store That Treats People Like People (that [sic] have individualistic needs)."

Johanson's drawings, both on paper and on scraps of painted wood, surround the tableau on the gallery walls, and they are loosely connected to it by an overhead network of painted wooden strips, suspended from above. The drawings have the casual appearance of children's art, coupled with flashes of intensity familiar to great outsider art. They are the show's most compelling work.

Johanson draws with acrylic in crude, flattened shapes and blunt colors. He chronicles a wide swath of emotive experience. Urbanites stride past a man sprawled on the ground, puddles of yellow and brown streaming from his pants. A dun-colored block of wood carries the printed caption: "This could be what the future looks like." A city is shown populated by diverse inhabitants, who all express nothing but joy.

Respectively, these three works telegraph indifference, caution and optimism. Each of Johanson's drawings encapsulates a similar, singular condition. They add up to a coherent whole in which cynicism may be the only absent ingredient.

* UCLA/Hammer Museum, 10899 Wilshire Blvd., Westwood, (310) 443-7000, through July 29. Closed Mondays.

Nature as Art: For the last half-dozen years, Roxy Paine has been making environmental sculptures of excruciatingly lifelike plant material, such as grass and dandelions, fabricated from cast and painted plastic. For his L.A. debut, the New York-based sculptor has covered the walls of the Christopher Grimes Gallery with fungus.

One large wall is dotted with several hundred spotted, flat-capped white mushrooms (the common yet poisonous Amanita, according to the title) in varying stages of growth and decay. Another is spotted with sulfurous clusters of thick, yellow fungi of the sort that grow like little shelves on tree bark.

A third wall holds a single object: a big brown puddle of painted fiberglass, which looks almost like a mummified wound. It's dry rot, the decay of timber caused by a cellulose-eating fungus, which peeks out from Paine's rippling brown mass.

On two walls the artist turns the art gallery, locus of cultural activity, into a cave, forest floor or shaded lawn, while the third exposes another natural environment that's usually hidden inside walls. Tensions between nature and culture make up familiar territory for art, but Paine manages a particularly sly assault on the hermetically sealed region of the art gallery. (His "Sulfur Shelf Wall," with its inherent fusion of the representational and the seemingly abstract, is especially effective.) At once lovely and off-putting, elegant and sinister, his quirky take on the traditional theme of vanitas transforms a pristine site of contemporary culture into a surprisingly charged space.

*

* Christopher Grimes Gallery, 916 Colorado Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 587-3373, through June 30. Closed Sundays and Mondays.