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Art review: 'Here Not There: San Diego Art Now' at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego

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A wander through “Here Not There: San Diego Art Now,” at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (<http://www.mcasd.org/>), feels much like a stroll through any dozen galleries in any major city in the United States. There’s work in a range of media, from charcoal, clay and oil, to photography, video, and installation incorporating plastic sheeting, fluorescent light fixtures, electric fans, cell phones and bird-seed-encrusted statuary.



Artists riff on childhood memory, popular culture, consumerism, other art, their homes, neighborhoods, and idiosyncratic selves. Some of (<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/.a/6a00d8341c630a53ef0133f250b9a9970b-pi>) the work is juicy, some desperately dry. Cleverness abounds.

In other words, “Here Not There” feels like Anywhere—familiar and somewhat homogeneous. Most of the 50 artists and collectives in the show think global while acting local, but as is the case with regional surveys, another dip from the same pool of qualifying participants would tell a different story. More conceptual or more sensual. More intimate or more ambitious. Another edit might produce a report more heavily oriented toward site, San Diego’s proximity to the border with Mexico, or some of the area’s dominant industries: the military, scientific research, leisure.

Museum associate curator Lucía Sanromán focused her picks on emerging and under-recognized artists, passing over local notables (Jean Lowe, Robert Irwin, Kim MacConnel, Richard Allen Morris, Eleanor Antin, Patricia Patterson and more).

“ ‘Here Not There’ does not aim to reach a single narrative illustrating notions of identity or regionalism, nor draw definitive conclusions about the nature of artistic production in San Diego County,” she states in the show’s introductory wall text. “The main objective is to chart as straight a trajectory as possible: from the artist’s studio to the exhibition gallery.”

Museums have been criticized in recent years for fast-tracking art in this way, but the strategy is particularly useful here, since San Diego is short on both commercial and alternative spaces. The middleman has already been all but eliminated. This scarcity of exhibition opportunities has not resulted in a paucity of artists, however. A show like this could be held every few years (and perhaps it should), with little redundancy, provided the emphasis shifted among generations, themes or approaches. The bulk of Sanromán’s chosen artists are in their 30s or 40s. None are students, but many have passed through (or teach at) local universities. Seven of them will also appear later this year in the Orange County Museum of Art’s 2010 California Biennial (<http://www.ocma.net/index.html?page=upcoming>). An evening of performance-based work by artists in the show was held in June; another, featuring film and new media, will be held on July 22.

What fills the museum’s La Jolla galleries is earnest and uneven—again, much like what fills galleries these days. Bright spots shimmer here and there. Several sculptors have inventive ways with their materials. Tom Driscoll splays colored cement casts of packaging materials across a long wall, a nod to both the recycled assemblages of Tony Cragg and the quirky forms of Peter Shelton. Jeff Irwin sets in motion a wonderfully wild cycle of denial, every material aspect of his work masquerading as something else: clay

mimics wood, which approximates the color of bone and assumes the form of an animal trophy. Jessica McCambly plants clusters of crystalline tendrils along two abutting walls, little white creatures or seedlings of mysterious origin, and John Oliver Lewis crafts odd, playhouse-like structures in clay the texture of taffy, painted the color of cocoa and pastel marshmallows.

Cleverness lapses into self-indulgence here and there, and too much of the work seems thin, derivative, unevolved. Among the more intriguing pieces is a short animation by Sheldon Brown, in which aerial views of subdivisions spliced together in pinwheel patterns twist into stripes and streaks. Dystopia morphs into an abstract utopian sublime, as the sounds of playground chatter give way to a meditative electronic hum. Another mesmerizing work, a huge, gorgeous charcoal drawing by Marisol Rendón, depicts a window covered by vertical blinds. Light strains to pass through the slats, but velvety blackness prevails, a metaphor for the “97% of Blindness” endured by the artist’s brother. The Border Corps’ little white paleta pushcart, parked in a corner, projects a video montage onto the floor, bringing back fond memories of the activist poetics of the Border Art Workshop in the ‘80s and ‘90s.

Wendell Kling’s “Happy Apple Color Organ: A Sound and Light Instrument” is the charmer of the show, and resonant on multiple levels. Against one wall, Kling has constructed a hoarder’s shrine of thrift-store table lamps, funky retro furnishings mostly shorn of shades and fitted with colored bulbs. Museum-goers activate the piece by winding a music box and rocking one of two old “Happy Apple” toys on springy cables. The bulbs flicker in response to the pattern and pace of the movements, and corresponding electronic tinkles emanate from equipment wired to the lights. The magic feels homespun—a domesticated homage to the chance-driven aesthetic of John Cage and the resourcefulness of Harry Partch—but linked as well to the long history of thought about the relationship between visual art and music. Kling’s installation lingers in the mind, eye and ear with its warm nostalgia, gentle humor and childlike sense of wonder.

--Leah Ollman

Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 700 Prospect St., La Jolla, (858) 454-3541, through Sept. 19. Closed Wednesdays.
www.mcasd.org (<http://www.mcasd.org>)

Above: Wendell Kling, Happy Apple Color Organ: A Sound and Light Instrument" Credit: Courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego

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