

Los Angeles Times

ART REVIEWS : ‘Coming Unraveled’ Is Anything But at Otis Gallery

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This is the final installment of The Times' reviews of shows in "LAX: The Los Angeles Exhibition." The first installment was published Thursday.

The list of artists included in "Coming Unraveled" at the Otis School of Art and Design's Gallery reads like a recipe for curatorial disaster. The thoughtfully installed exhibition of 29 works by 11 artists, however, looks remarkably coherent and feels strangely harmonious. Eloquenty curated by gallery director Ann Ayres, the show offers a deft, fresh and intelligent revision of abstract painting in Los Angeles.

Ayres begins by dismantling the categories and definitions we usually use to get a handle on abstraction. In her show, terms like *geometric reductivism*, *organic abstraction* and *process painting* make little sense. Rather than providing insights into the work, they actually get in the way of understanding what these artists are up to.

With a sharp eye, acute mind and playful touch of wit, Ayres thus opens a space between reading and seeing. Her show effectively destroys language's stranglehold on meaning by allowing a diverse array of paintings to elbow their way into the territory between words and ideas.

"Coming Unraveled" opens literally, with two cacophonous collages by Roy Dowell. These colorful eruptions of disparate textures, far-flung means of reproduction, fragments of texts, tid-bits of recognizable imagery, and wildly divergent scales hang just inside the gallery's entrance. They function like disruptive advertisements for bold thinking.

Dowell's vibrant collisions of popular imagery and formal abstraction demand, like the best works in the exhibition, that meaning be continually remade in the present, by the viewer's active engagement with images. His collages also summarize the show's insistence that every act of artistic creation contains an equally vital impulse toward destruction.

At the other end of the show wait three silently riveting paintings by John M. Miller. Their precisely arrayed fields of tilted bars and sharply angled dashes perfectly divide two or four panels of raw canvas into apparently opposite constellations of black or white marks. With patience and the willingness to follow the subtle rhythms of Miller's stunning abstractions, their hard edges, crisp contrasts and seemingly violent oppositions dissolve into an all-over fluidity.

Echoes of green and wafts of blue hover within these seemingly colorless images. Wholly self-possessed, they draw us into their orbit by abolishing the distance between sensation and cognition. By briefly fusing perception and knowledge, Miller's powerful paintings elicit experiences that come into awareness at the same time that they escape us. Like Ayres' exhibition at its best, his works make sense by slipping past rationality's control.

Carter Potter's interwoven strips of film, Nancy Evans' stenciled pours of candy-colored acrylic, Charles Gaines' fragmentary phrases interspersed among maniacally repeated numbers, and Marc Pally's dynamic, 3-D doodles stand out in this inventive exploration of abstract painting. All four recycle conventional modes of image-making with verve and elan.

Robin Mitchell, Matthew Thomas, Linda Burnham, Stephen Spargur and Edith Baumann-Hudson also play with established styles and conventional issues. Their competent paintings, however, break little original ground, instead filling in the spaces created by the show's more ambitious reconfigurations of visual meaning.

Ayres' exhibition demonstrates that expectations must be aggressively overturned if abstract painting is to be remade with energy and originality. "Coming Unraveled" succeeds in convincing us that shattering, dispersing and

dissecting--even unraveling--is essential to any vigorous attempt to make paintings in the present.

** Otis Gallery, 2401 Wilshire Blvd., (213) 251-0555, through Feb. 10. Closed Sundays and Mondays.*

“Visiting Hours” is the most intensely gripping and profoundly human installation-cum-performance this critic has ever pondered, tried to escape and endured. Acted out by writer-artist Bob Flanagan, in collaboration with photographer Sheree Rose, this no-holds-barred piece of theater at the Santa Monica Museum of Art is also a deeply revealing piece of autobiography.

With unflinching honesty and brave directness, it outlines Flanagan’s struggle to make sense of both a disease he inherited at birth and his long-held, masochistic desires. His exhausting work-in-progress combines the ruthless calculation of the cruelly selfless, one-shot ordeals Chris Burden performed throughout the ‘70s, with an unquenchable, up-to-the-minute curiosity about the unknowable causes of his own intimate desires.

Flanagan was born with cystic fibrosis, a fatal disease that turns digestion and breathing into a painful, losing battle with one’s most ordinary bodily functions. At 40, Flanagan has outlived so many prognoses of his death that these medical predictions now sound like farcical failures of modern science. What’s certain about his inimitable work is that it presents his desire for respite from illness as something both normal and sick, simultaneously monstrous and ordinary.

The installation consists of an extremely detailed, mock hospital room and various devices that make evident Flanagan’s inescapable love of pain. A wall of seven video monitors, strung up on a wooden rack, matter-of-factly depicts Flanagan’s frail body undergoing a battery of unimaginable torture.

This graphic presentation would be sensationalistic and exploitative if Flanagan himself were not present in the hospital bed, always available to answer any visitor’s questions. The even, patient tone of his voice makes evident his struggle to comprehend his body’s predicament, as well as his willingness to communicate openly with viewers about his desires.

It is as if he and every one of his inquisitive visitors occupied the same position, both excluded from, and alien to, his body's unfathomable demands. "Visiting Hours" thus examines the chilling intersection between one man's pain and pleasure in order to offer a moving scrutiny of occasions when none of us can distinguish between free will and blind compulsion.

In an adjoining gallery, a group show of three African-American artists much less effectively interrogates black identity. Curated by Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins, "Body Politic: The Perception and Use of the Body as a Messenger for Change," pales in comparison to Flanagan's powerful self-analysis. Including installations by Michele Elizabeth, Todd Gray and Lyle Ashton Harris, this pretentiously titled show amounts to little more than an empty exercise in political correctness, a hollow gesture as cliched as it is academic.

Elizabeth's piece consists of charred chunks of eucalyptus bark hanging from the ceiling; a mound of dirt, twigs, sticks and candles on the floor, and nails driven through a white garment into the wall. It evokes a ritual we have just missed. Like undergraduate work, its worn and obvious associations fail to elicit our sympathy or engage our interest.

Likewise, Harris' "The Secret Life of a Snow Queen," never gets beyond the mere appearance of analytic engagement. His booth-like installation is made up of mirrors inscribed with trendy, psychoanalytic jargon and images of a Black man who likes to wear wigs and white-face. Rather than delivering insights into this confusing, difficult situation, Harris' piece simply presents it.

The most egregiously simplistic work is Gray's "Reflections on the American Dram," which purports to explore Michael Jackson's bizarre lifestyle and battery of cosmetic surgeries. Gray, who once worked as the Pop star's photographer, has scattered images of the young and old Michael around the room and written a long-winded statement across larger photographs on the wall.

His installation claims that the reclusive star's behavior can be explained as a Black man's attempt to fit into white society. What his account fails to address is Jackson's profound weirdness, his status as neither man nor woman, black nor white, adult nor child. Jackson has gone so far beyond "fitting in" that he has become a compelling and fascinating work of art himself. Gray's crude

attempt to analyze these facts falls far short of its subject. His installation, like the exhibition as a whole, functions like sophomoric sociology: It has the feel of untested abstractness and eager overstatement.

** Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2437 Main St., Santa Monica, (310) 399-0433, through Jan. 17. Closed Mondays and Tuesdays.*

“Transforming Traditions,” at the George J. Doizaki Gallery, juxtaposes David Roesler’s earthenware vessels and Joseph Shuldiner’s wood and paper constructions. Both artists use the techniques of traditional Asian crafts to make contemporary hybrids. Their work is pleasantly unburdened by the fact that it functions as stylized decoration.

Roesler’s 30 jars and six wall objects update a centuries-old ceramic technique, wherein potters inlaid a contrasting color of clay in the surfaces of tea bowls and food containers to create two-colored patterns. Roesler’s mod, odd-shaped pots come in as many as six colors. Their designs refer to traditional patterns as well as those of American Indians and Australian Aborigines.

The stoppers and lids on his vessels hide artfully designed interiors. Some rest on metal rings, swing from cradles or rock on curved bottoms. With playful titles, such as “Off My Rocker” or “Bare Bottom Baby Burner,” his meticulously crafted objects border on being cute.

Shuldiner’s free-standing constructions made from translucent rice paper stretched over eucalyptus branches evoke associations with human skin and bones as well as architectural dwellings. Some contain light bulbs and cast a soft glow around the room. Like Roesler’s quasi-functional vessels, they transform a tradition of exquisite craftsmanship into the means for making contemporary decorative objects.

George J. Doizaki Gallery, Japanese American Cultural and Community Center, 244 South San Pedro St., (213) 628-2725, through Jan. 14. Closed Mondays.

“Frank Romero at the Boathouse” at Plaza de la Raza presents an efficient survey of the 51-year-old artist’s wide-ranging work from 1984 to the present. Animated paintings of local cityscapes, silly cut-out reliefs of skeletons on automobiles, neon signs shaped like cats and cars, as well as small figurative sculptures on wheels show the celebrated Chicano artist at his playful, if superficial best.

A gorgeous still-life from this year, titled “Oracion/A Prayer” stands out among Romero’s otherwise schematic images and simplified symbols. It depicts nine votive candles whose bright yellow, peach and cream-colored flames illuminate a sumptuous field of luxurious violets, deep burgundies and resonant reds. Its freshly brushed surface still looks wet, giving it an uncharacteristically rich sensuousness.

More meditative, understated and formally elegant than any other of Romero’s brash works, this painting reveals an unrecognized side of his art, one that embodies great promise for future explorations.

Plaza de la Raza, 3540 N. Mission Road, (213) 223-2475, through Jan. 31. Closed Mondays and Saturdays.