

Artists who transcend Pop

DAVID BONETTI, EXAMINER ART CRITIC June 12, 2000

THE POP sensibility reigns at Refusalon, 20 Hawthorne St., in the two-person show featuring Didi Dunphy and Cheryl Meeker that continues through June 30. But both

artists are interested in more than cheery colors and popular culture.

Dunphy, a former San Franciscan who lives in Athens, Ga., has a long history of slyly infusing formalism, the practice of addressing only the elements of the art object that define its nature, with pop content - for instance, fabricating awnings from canvases that could pass as Kenneth Noland stripe paintings. She continues her witty reworking of recent art history here.

Her two wall reliefs are brilliant works of design that would make great backdrops for a party of martini-swilling supermodels. Each "Modern Convenience" is made from round, naugahyde-upholstered cushions, with a single centered button, arranged in grids. (The 36-unit piece is a composition of 3-by-12-foot; the 28-unit piece is 4-by-7.)

The reliefs are reminiscent of that icon of '50s design, George Nelson's "Marshmallow Chair," and by referencing design rather than "high" art, Dunphy has invaded the turf previously colonized by L.A. artists Jorge Pardo and, especially, Jim Isermann.

But Dunphy has more up her sleeve. The cushions' vibrant colors have been appropriated from the color charts of the home furnishing collections of Laura Ashley and Ralph Lauren. Mixed up, the nostalgic Brit and the stylistically reactionary New Yorker are strangely compatible.

Dunphy has also made a series of small wall pieces that feature embroidered abstractions based on Josef Albers "Homage to the

Square" paintings. Fiber art was the medium Albers' wife, Anni, practiced, and since weaving is traditionally a woman's art, she has ever gotten her due.

Meeker's photographs, wall mural and video go well with Dunphy's work. Her photos, 20-by-30-inch color prints, feature M&Ms, and the brightly colored circular candies that melt in your mouth (but not in your hand) and the circular cushions in Dunphy's wall reliefs combine to make the exhibition, formally, a set of variations on the circle.

Meeker photographs her M&Ms against the day's stock quotations, and the juxtaposition suggests that the chocolate candies might function as currency, a choice no more arbitrary than some of the items that have served that purpose historically. (And with the stock market's irrational behavior, the idea of elevating candy treats to precious commodity status is rather amusing.)

But Meeker's intention is to use the M&Ms to critique the media and commodity fetishization. "In eating this product, we replace needed nutrition with chemical colorants and preservatives and actually consume the logo," according to the press release.

The show features a video of an Oakland Safeway store abandoned when the owners disinvested in the neighborhood. The building's windows in turn supply the pattern for stock quotations Meeker has painted across the wall, emphasizing that the current boom economy has not lifted all boats.

In his new work at the Fraenkel Gallery, 49 Geary St., which runs through June 24,

Bay Area photographer J. John Priola continues his exploration of absence and loss

through the use of visual metaphor. In three separate but compatible bodies of work, Priola probes states of melancholia.

In a series of images of neglected plots in old graveyards, many overgrown with weeds, the mood is elegiac if literal. Better is the series of 40-by-32-inch images of interior walls. Tending toward white, the photos show the traces of past actions and use. In one, a nail pierces the wall, the frame (or mirror) it held removed, leaving its oval impression below. In another, the aged paint suggests both the passage of time and lack of care. (Many artists, Aaron Siskind and Minor White among them, have taken pictures of chipped-paint surfaces, but Priola has added something fresh to the tradition.) In one of the most graphic, a light-switch plate has been turned black by repeated use.

A series of images of lighted door numbers adds a different tone. Suggestively ominous, they possess a noirish quality familiar in movies and novels set in mid-century Los Angeles.

June is gay, lesbian, transgender etc., pride month internationally, and a number of galleries have mounted shows to mark the occasion. Most explicit is "PRETTYTOWN: Queer Americana in San Francisco," Part One of which continues through June 30 at ESP 305 Valencia St (Part Two opens July 7)

I suppose the most cheering aspect of the ve-artist show is that if you didn't know I suppose the most cheering aspect of the ve artist show is that if you didn't know its theme, you might not identify any of the artists as queer - except of course for Darin Klein's collages of '70s porno stars, each of whom the artist has endowed with a bindi, a little Indian jewel, on the center of their foreheads. How cute!

The work I found most satisfying is by Xylor Jane and Tony Meredith. Jane has made a handsome series of hard-edged geometric paintings on found chalkboards she leaves uncleaned. The patterns, built up of small colored squares, are anything but

arbitrary. Based on the Fibonacci series that was invented by a 13th century Italian mathematician to quantify organic growth, they have a rigorous structure.

Formerly of the Bay Area, Meredith, who works in L.A.'s VITRA showroom, has made a wall piece out of a variety of light-switch plates. Sassy and smart, it makes the use of found materials fresh just when you thought no one could do anything new with it.

These shows mark the end of ESP, one of the small galleries that spring up in low-rent neighborhoods that help make an art scene lively. Like Julie Deamer, who closed her Four Walls a few months ago, ESP's Matt Pawlowksi is moving to Los Angeles. Our loss is the Southland's gain.

In his new photo collages at the Hosfelt Gallery, 430 Clementina St., veteran New England-based artist John O'Reilly continues to combine homoerotic and art historical imagery to create emotionally piquant works that explore issues of longing and desire. (The show runs through July 8.)

In these recent works, collectively titled "Tears," a mood of melancholy dominates. O'Reilly's characteristically densely layered images are no less complex, but the overall effect is of spaciousness in which only a few fragments of imagery emerge from the prevailing gloom.

The most typical works here feature a fragment from vintage pornography with a gure from a painting by Watteau, a juxtaposition that creates a touching effect. In "Tears No. 5," a reclining nude, seen only from the waist up, raises his head to watch what is happening to him out of the frame. Above, a giant fragment of Watteau's Mezzetin, the young man's guardian angel, turns his head plaintively away.

Hosfelt is also showing new paintings by William Wood that offer further examples of his uid virtuosity with oil and wax.If Wood's kind of abstract painting appeals to you, make sure you go to the jennjoygallery, 49 Geary St. to see the show of new paintings by the young Dutch artist Twan Janssen before it closes June 17. Janssen's work plays delightful games with illusionism. His painting appear to be made of brightly colored straw or rafa woven

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into colorful patterns and adorned with pompons or butteries. Some of them are veiled with transparent sheets of cloth. But everything is made from acrylic paint, the ribbons, the veils, the butteries. Such formal insouciance one associates with Los Angeles painting today, but I guess the L.A. style is now international.