

Los Angeles Times

AT THE GALLERIES

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SAN DIEGO — It's no wonder that many painters resist being called "abstract" artists. A term that once sufficed to describe all art not employing recognizable, representational imagery, abstraction has come to embody a host of ambiguous and contradictory meanings. As New York painter Marcia Hafif explained in a recent magazine interview, "I've come to see that realism is abstract, that abstraction is abstract, (and) that abstraction is also concrete."

Engagement with these very dichotomies is what interests the artists in the exhibition "Abstractions of the Eighties" and makes their work, at times, captivating. The show, at UC San Diego's Mandeville Gallery through Feb. 21, includes three works each by six young Southern California painters.

Curator Gerry McAllister's wide-ranging selection dips equally into the camps of hotly expressive and coolly restrained art, demonstrating that abstraction is, at present, a multifarious concept that can be generalized about with only mild success. One of the few observations that can be stated with some certainty is that these abstractionists of the '80s rely heavily on the foundations established by those in the '40s, '50s, '60s and '70s.

Michael Roberts and Pauline Stella Sanchez, both from Los Angeles, owe their greatest debts to the generation of Abstract Expressionists who introduced soulful, spiritual physicality to American painting.

Roberts' large triptychs each juxtapose a stark black central panel with side panels of lush, sensuous brush strokes, also in black but subtly tempered by alternating hues. The side panels' forest of wavering lines flickers with motion next to the static monumentality of the central space. The textural anonymity of this central area sharpens our sensitivity to the modulations and nuances of the atmospheric passages on either side. This marriage of opposites evokes a stirring visual experience, reminiscent of Mark Rothko's late, quietly meditative works.

Sanchez's works extend the physicality of what was termed action painting in the 1940s and '50s to its sculptural extreme. Her canvases have been thickly layered with muted tones and then excavated by scraping much of the pigment to the edges, where it clings in a wrinkled, lumpy mass. Upon these highly distressed skins of paint, Sanchez draws childlike outlines of airplanes, helicopters and Mickey Mouse hats.

Sanchez's use of recognizable imagery confounds her classification as an abstract painter. But the imagery seems secondary to the aggressive, even violent act of painting, suggesting that the real subjects of these works are color, texture and the process involved in their manipulation. Though tame in comparison to Sanchez's larger, more assaulting works, these paintings exude a bold and intriguing presence.

San Diego artist Richard Baker paints in a style that also harks back to Abstract Expressionism, but his imagery reaches back further, to Surrealism's biomorphic, "automatic" forms. Except for a pearly, moon-like sphere in "Storm," and another form reminiscent of a segment of a picket fence, Baker's shapes yield no concrete associations. They seem to derive from the artist's own intimate iconography, his own set of cryptic personal codes.

Like Yves Tanguy's "mindscapes" of the 1940s, Baker's paintings suggest visions of an intuitive or dreamed reality, a plane of existence not conforming to the standard matrices of time and space. The enigmatic and elusive, however, can easily verge on the pretentious and self-indulgent, and Baker's work ventures dangerously close to that edge.

The remaining three artists in the show, Edith Baumann-Hudson and Dave de Buck from Los Angeles and John Eden from Santa Barbara, employ precise geometric vocabularies that generally position their work more in a cerebral than emotional realm. Baumann-Hudson's rigid patterns of black bands on white and vice versa exude the

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pristine sterility of much hard-edge, Minimal art of the 1960s. They add little to this genre but a nearly confrontational degree of optical intensity.

De Buck's constructions, made of acrylic and wood on canvas, feature mosaics of flat geometric shapes aligned to present the illusion of peering through transparent three-dimensional forms. Though the play between flatness and illusion barely transcends the level of a perceptual game, these are elegant works, much enhanced by De Buck's use of pigments that appear dull from straight on but from an oblique angle present glimmering, metallic sheens.