

Art speak

Of things seen and not seen

The most original technique of all is honesty.

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'Anna Tomczak and Susan Zukowsky' • Allyn Gallup Contemporary Art / Mira Mar Gallery through Jan. 3

Art, when all is said and done, is a bag of tricks. Every 100 years or so, somebody invents a new trick; even so, the tricks are finite. But this is the same as saying the alphabet is finite. What matters isn't reinventing the alphabet but what you do with the letters (or artistic techniques) you've got. The old becomes new if you do something new with it, if you make it yours. The more things stay the same, the more they change.

So, for example, Susan Zukowsky is doing what a lot of contemporary artists are doing. She's revealing and concealing. She's telling stories but not telling the whole story. She's speaking in a private symbolic language that's only partially accessible. So, Ke Francis has his tornadoes and killer hoop snakes; Clyde Burnett has his blue millionaires and armadillos; Zukowsky has her eggs and bits of religious iconography. It's the same trick ...

But it's not.

First, there's her near obsessive-compulsive attention to detail. Physically, what she creates is collages and assemblages, often but not always framed in glass boxes. Zukowsky creates a tableau, a mental landscape located somewhere in the vicinity of the lands of Magritte and Dali, and then pulls it into the third dimension with a layering technique.

Her "The Briars of Love" shows a woman's hands wrapped around the head of a "Watership Down" variety rabbit, a tangled grove of trees in the background. The limbs and branches of the trees have been meticulously cut and pasted over each other, layer on layer as the perspective recedes. This paper-oak grove is below the bunny, which is below the woman's hands, which are below a layer of actual glass beads and delicate twigs. In "The Spare Womb," a woman's hand holding an egg reaches out from a round window into a circular architectural space; it's also reaching out into real space, a precisely cut collage element that casts a real shadow.

All this layering makes what you see seem more real. Each of Zukowsky's works is an arrangement of artifacts (some with very personal significance), and not a mere image. It's like looking at the shrine of some exotic religion. You don't know exactly what it means, but it has a certain power.

Here again, she takes a different tack from many contemporary artists in her use of symbols. Going back to, say, Mannerist art and before, Western artists who used symbols used an agreed-on, accessible symbolic language; they also made their symbolic representations beautiful. I.e.; you know it's the Virgin Mary because her robe is blue, but her robe is also pleasing to the eye. Nowadays, artists tend to use a private symbolic language and a rough-and-ready execution. As densely symbolic as it is, her work is also beautiful. You could appreciate it as eye candy alone. You could be blind to all the symbols and still fall



Susan Zukowsky's "The Spare Womb"

in love with it.

As to what those symbols mean, Zukowsky's message is encrypted but not entirely opaque. The eggs and rabbits must have something to do with femininity and fertility. In her "El Cuarto de Tula," the private space of a bedroom is open to the tempest of the outside world in a room of transparent walls. Leaves like flames fall from above. The ceiling is a fixed depiction of the wheeling heavens, art's futile attempt to stop time. It's all about the insults of time to a woman, right? As with many of her pieces, when you decode the beautiful imagery,

the meaning locked inside is painful if not disturbing.

But the point isn't to decode the work. It's art, not a puzzle on the back of a cereal box. The real point is to have a dialogue with her work, to find deeper layers of meaning of meaning and contradiction, not reduce it to some clever phrase — which is all an art review can do, after all. There's no substitute for actually looking at the work. But you've heard that one before ...

My bag of tricks is also finite.

Anna Tomczak has the advantage of working with a new technological trick: Polaroid image transfer, or dye-infusion photography, if you want to be highfa-



by Marty
FUGATE



Anna Tomczak's "Tarot Holder"

lutin about it.

Interestingly, what she does is an exact reverse of Zukowsky's technique. Zukowsky will take an illusionistic representation of the third dimension within a picture frame's pretend space and then mess with your mind by literally pulling it into 3-D space with her collage/layering/assemblage technique; Tomczak takes photographs of arrangements of objects in the real world and then flattens them down into the 2-D picture planes of her oversized, manipulated prints.

Like Zukowsky, she has a private symbolic vocabulary stocked with raided bits of iconography from various traditions; she's also similar in her preference for formal (i.e.: symmetrical) compositions. Her work is darker to the eye, but lighter to what it speaks to heart and mind.

"Paradise" shows a Buddha figure, birds of paradise flowers and a flying bird of paradise. (A verbal/visual pun there.) "Tarot Holder," one of Tomczak's sunnier color schemes, shows a yellow sun and moon (taken from the arcana's deck, no doubt), a curtain of beads, a charm bracelet, a close-up figure of some turbaned mystic's head. It makes you want to smile; there's no hint of the death card here. Her "The Blessing" is the figure of a saintly, robed woman (as far as I can tell) surrounded by flowers, a tortoise shell, the clean, long-desiccated rib cage of some animal, what could be a bit of another animal's skin. It sounds gruesome, but it's not. It's the kind of thing you might see in a reliquary. Looking at it, the effect is peaceful and meditative. I looked at it for a long time and didn't find a hint of irony.

There's no lurking subtext in Tomczak's imagery. The beauty is what it is, sometimes witty, sometimes spiritual, and not quite so gnomic and unsettling in its implications as the beautiful visions of her companion in this exhibit.

But Tomczak is Tomczak and Zukowsky Zukowsky.

The hardest trick of all is to say whatever you have to say in whatever technique you say it in and still be yourself. The hardest trick is ultimately not a trick; it's just being honest. Both of these artists are.

And I'd be dishonest to imply my words are any substitute for ...

But I already said that, didn't I! □