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ART REVIEW: Concepts by Degrees

This annual group exhibition of MFA students at UCSB offers the provocations, diversity and fresh ideas the show has long been known for

By Josef Woodard, News-Press Correspondent
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'The Chess Club: UCSB 2018 MFA Thesis Exhibition'

When: through June 3

Where: The Art, Design & Architecture Museum, UC Santa Barbara

Hours: 12 to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday

Information: 893-2951, museum.ucsb.edu

One of the heartening and heady events of Santa Barbara's art calendar arrives, like regular but also reinventive clockwork, at the tail end of UCSB's academic year. This is the moment when the MFA students in a given year take over the university's art museum, the Art, Design & Architecture Museum, and give the space and our senses a pleasurable jolt out of complacency.

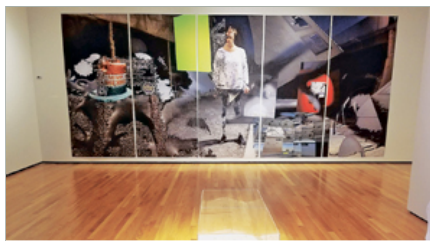
This year's gathering of artists passing over the MFA transition, a show called "The Chess Club" and curated by Bruce Ferguson, presents a typical scenario in the Museum space, which is to say an atypical and highly personal expression of concepts and solutions honed within each artist's style. Social and ecological commentary, of varying shades and mediums, blends in with reshaped visions of painting and sculpture, and nothing in the rooms that we could honestly call formulaic or locked into a strict artistic mold. New ideas are alive, well and malleable here.

While each artist follows a personal artistic path, the centralizing notion for this year's show comes by way of famed proto-Modernist/Dadaist Marcel Duchamp from a

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century hence. DuChamp famously and infamously created some of the more provocative and archetypal modernist artworks early in his life, and then gave up life for chess. A telling DuChamp quote is placed strategically, like a mantra, in the exhibition's press release: "All this twaddle, the existence of God, atheism, determinism, liberation, societies, death, etc., are pieces of a chess game called language, and they are amusing only if one does not preoccupy oneself with winning or losing this game of chess."

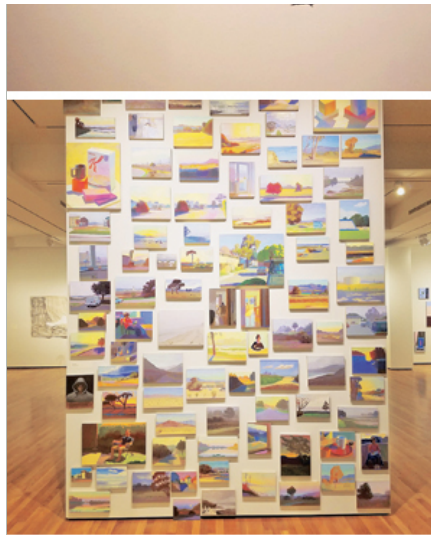
In a new twist on the old MFA tradition, the artists responsible (Lucy Holtsnider, Robert Huerta, Daria Noor Izad, Jennifer Luginis, Jimmy Miracle, Carlos Ochoa and Toni Scott) are given a face and personality in the small entrance gallery of the museum, via painted portraits by Mr. Miracle. Like others in the current MFA group, Mr. Miracle comes to UCSB with an already established set of achievement and artworld connections, and one of his paintings can also be found in the concurrent group of the Museum's Permanent Collection works.

But if the MFA portrait "club" in front and another traditional-seeming portrait, "Dreamer," heed a more traditional painterly convention, he shows a more subversive instinct with a group of small canvases dubbed "Hiding in the Light," densely-packed onto a floating wall facing the main museum gallery entrance. These are affably scrappy, rough-hewn and one might assume "unfinished" examples of generic landscapes, still life subjects, mundane figures in the neighborhood, a Pop Art-y Special K box, and the sum effect supersedes the importance of the component parts.

As stated in a wall text about the artist and his motives and "moves" (a strategic word and concept for the "Chess Club"), the underlying principle of his tiny painting trove is "to rigorously utilize eminently traditional skills in drawing and painting as a kind of contemporary radical act."

The other painting element in this MFA show takes its radical act a bit more lightly, or does she? Ms. Luginis's group of paintings set back in one corner of the main gallery, identified as a single "multi-paneled painting," goes by the macro-title "Only Good Lies Before Me." In this set of paintings, flat colors are assembled on canvas in an almost mock-collage fashion, alluding to and jumbling both concrete reality references and junctures where the real goes abstract, and vice-versa. Strangely, an at once happy and disconcerting effect - a moral and stylistic ambivalence - is the expressive upshot.

Grey zoning of existing emotional or mediumistic assumptions is also a critical aspect in Daria Noor Izad's "Grit and Grace," a deceptively shambling installation of unframed canvases, crafted wood and ceramics, which is still in progress. (A work table sits in the midst of the painting-sculptural construction, with tools and materials at the ready). The Iranian-American artist's piece hovers, with an intentional ambiguity, around themes of female life, rituals and the literal and metaphorical aspects of horses, with an intuitive and non-linear language at work.



From top to bottom:

"Border (lands)" by Robert Huerta.

"Eddy I and II" by Lucy Holtsnider.

"Tumble I and II" by Lucy Holtsnider.

"Hiding in the Light" by Jimmy Miracle.

"Only Good Lies Before Me" by Jennifer Luginis.

"Grit and Grace" by Daria Noor Izad.

Venturing into the virtual interior reality, that increasingly popular invisible domain is represented by Carlos Ochoa's "So You Think You Want a Paradise." His virtual reality project, which ushers the viewer-listener onto an imaginary landscape of fluorescent hues and pixelated fantasy-formalism, is a vision which seems critical of virtual worlds even as it embraces its potential.

Toni Scott's "The Empire Strikes Back" is a large assemblage made of palm fronds, rope and wood, disarmingly disoriented by her act of painting the entire black. We get a strong impression of the easy life imposed upon and choked by restraints, of the rope-implied and racial kind. The African-American artist also shows "Phrenology Pseudoscience" and "My Head, My Music," through which the artist's measurement of her own head are translated into pitches used in a music box contraption of her own imaginative and coded devising.

In the current vulnerable state of immigration, under the Trump regime, the show might be remiss not to address the pressing subject of immigration, a task ably taken on with Robert Huerta's "Border (lands)." The artist, son of Mexican immigrants, has created an installation combining video, a hyper digital collage "mural," jumbo envelopes from "U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services" and the elemental stuff of dirt, in plexiglass boxes centered in the museum's back gallery. To brave a cliché, the dirt itself is a grounding force in the necessarily complex multi-media display, and it signifies a loaded subject: dirt as symbol of land, ownership, deracination, exclusionary tactics and redefined earth.

As is the tradition with the MFA exhibitions, each artist is given a space to call their own, as compared to group shows with intertwined artists. Lucy Holtsnider's designated space is a pair of walls, which get "into the act" as hosts for her sparsely-dispersed monotype print collage on handmade paper piece, protruding slightly from the wall to create an added dimensionality. Her works, with such nature-referential titles as "Thicket," "Eddy," "Thistle" and "Tumble," involved mutant forms, strong yet fragile, relating to her underlying interest in the deleterious effects of climate change.

In "Thicket," tree bark-like shards are imposed on by a white fencing/grid, a figure-ground-oppression relationship which may not be one of the less subtle statements in the show, but nonetheless triggers an impulsive response from viewers in 2018.

Once again, the MFA brigade provokes, pleases and refuses to let visitors go easily into the good night and day.

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