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Galleries - Kenneth Baker

A breezy vibe infuses L.A. paintings

David Bonetti
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Even before you look at anything closely at the Hosfelt Gallery's show "New Work: L.A. Painting," you can almost feel the cool breezes blowing off the beach at Malibu. And when you start to focus on the nearly 30 works in this expansive show, the same sense of breezy insouciance holds up.

The show features 15 artists ranging from established painters like Stuart Arends, Ron Griffin and Roy Thurston to novices, and it suggests that painters in Los Angeles are more interested in surface, color, space and decoration than in self-expression or psychological probing.

Inventive use of materials is the norm. Carter Potter pulls found film stock over stretchers to make a "painting," and Thurston has covered an aluminum sheet he's scraped with a cool blue acrylic.

Seth Kaufman wins the prize for transformation of the commonplace into art. In one piece, he's gathered lengths of paint-laden wallpaper and assembled them into a cascade that hangs on the wall like a bad memory. In two others, he has created placemat-like "paintings" out of plastic beads he has arranged and burned together. And in another, hanging in the gallery's office, he has embedded eggshells in resin.

Abstraction prevails, but the few representational works are hardly realistic. Greg Rose's two "landscapes" look like the decorative panels you might find in a '50s Palm Springs coffee shop.

NO UPTIGHT BOSTONIANS

There are two noteworthy photography shows in the 49 Geary Street gallery building.

The photographs in Nicholas Nixon's "Lovers" should put to bed the canard that Bostonians are uptight about their bodies. All but two of the 25 images of couples at their most intimate were taken in Boston or nearby towns.

The subjects, all of whom answered a newspaper ad, are multiracial, multigenerational

(although few are intragenerational) and both same- and other-sex-oriented -- although because of Nixon's close focus you have to look very closely to determine their gender in many instances.

Tenderness and familiarity are the norm. Few first-time or overheated encounters are recorded -- only those comfortable with their (largely imperfect) bodies and their partners would give a stranger with a camera entree to their boudoirs. Indeed, a few more passionate shots might have enlivened the series, which is being shown here for the first time.

Nixon is admired for the humanistic content of his work, but in the best pictures here, formal issues trump the psychosexual. His radical cropping makes us see arrangements of limbs, necks and other body parts before we recognize bodies in congress.

PICTURES OF POVERTY

In Todd Hido's latest show, the local photographer continues to take night pictures of neglected houses on the outskirts of cities where the underclass are warehoused. Such repetition might sound uneventful or even boring, but Hido invests each image with such specificity and distinction that it holds the same interest for the viewer that a portrait does.

In our class complacency, we tend to think all the poor are alike, dragging dirty children through the city streets, their overstuffed bags dripping Cheez- doodles. But Hido shows that poverty is as diverse as wealth.

In each of Hido's photographs, there is a significant detail that makes the picture grab and hold our attention -- it's what Roland Barthes, in his book "Camera Lucida," called a photograph's punctum. In one, it's the broken chain- link fence that encloses the yard; in another, a line of turned-off colored Christmas lights; in another, the "No Trespassing" signs stenciled on a fortresslike wall. There's more to these pictures than first strikes the eye.

GALLERY SHOWS

NEW WORK: L.A. PAINTING: Through Aug. 18. Hosfelt Gallery, 430 Clementina St., San Francisco. (415) 495-5454.

LOVERS: Photographs by Nicholas Nixon. Through Aug. 25. Fraenkel Gallery, 49 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 981-2661.

GALLERY SHOW

TODD HIDO: NEW PHOTOGRAPHS: Through Sept. 1. Stephen Wirtz Gallery, 49 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 433-6879.

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