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There's no glamour, just deep themes

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In her second solo show in Los Angeles, Kristen Morgin strips away the sentimentality that made her earlier works look nostalgic -- so obsessed with yesteryear that they seemed to have been made by someone with her heart set on turning the clock back. Her new works are timely and pointed, born of a sensitivity to the trauma of the real world but tough enough to know that fantasizing about the good old days too often goes nowhere.

At Marc Selwyn Fine Art, the sentiments Morgin's clay sculptures trigger are social, complex and open-ended. Unlike conventional trips down memory lane, her fired and unfired works treat the present as a treasure that can disappear in an instant, due to a moment of inattentiveness or for no fault of one's own, much less any good reason.

Injustice, mortality and fate are typically the stuff of Greek tragedies. Morgin brings viewers to these big, often portentous subjects by way of humble, readily accessible things: cartoon characters, paperbacks, toys and doodles.

The installation is about as glamorous as yard-sale leftovers. In the center of the gallery stands a pair of makeshift tables, pushed together and covered with coffee cups, puppets, figurines, comic books, pulp novels, children's books and boxes of playing cards, candies and cigarettes.

All have been handcrafted by Morgin, shaped in clay and meticulously painted with acrylics and ink or glazed.

The playthings have the look of 1930s and '40s Americana, before the toy industry was a billion-dollar enterprise and dolls, spaceships, race cars and ducks were pretty simple. Not especially realistic, they required lots of imagination on the part of the kids and were made to last.

The coffee cups are a little funkier, with such cartoon characters as Goofy, Tweety Bird and Bugs Bunny sharing space with Frankenstein, Pebbles, Snoopy and Hello Kitty. Not one of Morgin's cups matches another in size, shape or subject. Each embodies the pathos of a retail store's remainder bin and the loneliness of the last surviving relative.

Morgin's clay replicas of comic books, storybooks and paperback classics are stranger still. Made of unfired clay, each wears its fragility on its sleeve. Many look water-damaged, their yellowed pages stuck together. The most fascinating are the ones with which Morgin takes the most liberties, mixing up the story lines of the original comic strips, drawing other cartoon characters -- in fine black lines -- over brightly colored compositions and adding depictions of Charlie Chaplin and images borrowed from Philip Guston, Keith Haring and Dr. Seuss.

The rest of the gallery is chockablock with Morgin's eccentric diptychs, each combining an original book with her haunting rendition of it in clay and paint. The pairings invite before-and-after comparisons. Morgin's skills as a realist recall works by contemporaries Steve Wolfe and George Stoll. But verisimilitude is only a starting point for Morgin, who piles up references in a terrifically mismatched mess that captures the complexity of the present and the way the past lives in it.

The five largest pieces give the poignant poetry of her small works greater physicality. Two extraordinarily detailed board games, a life-size bicycle, a nearly 4-foot-tall Mighty Mouse and a 5-foot Popeye put Morgin in league with such California heavyweights as H.C. Westermann, Ed Kienholz and George Herms. It's heady territory that is as risky and thrilling as the real thing.

Marc Selwyn Fine Art, 6222 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 101, L.A., (323) 933-9911, through Aug. 16. Closed Sundays and Mondays.