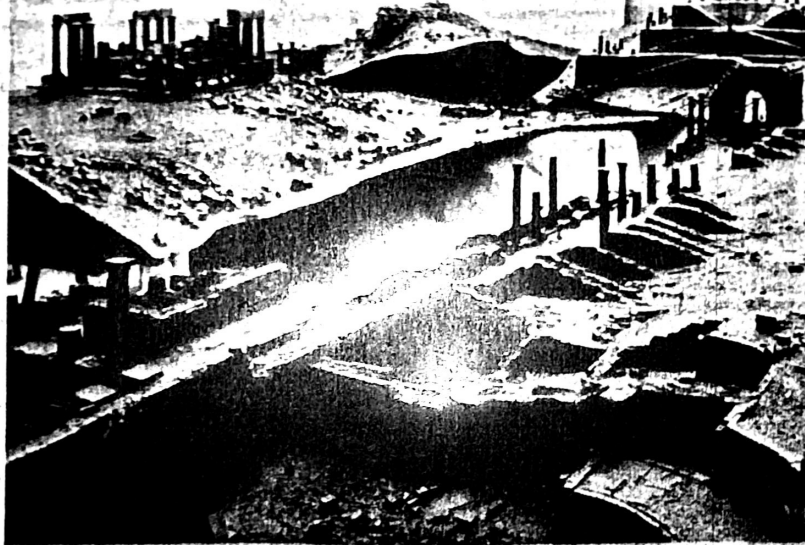


L.A. Art Seen

"History and Culture: French Contemporary Sculpture" at Newport Harbor Art Museum

The "history" in this exhibition comes from Anne and Patrick Poirier, who collaborate on installation sculpture simulating the ruins of Western civilization. You enter a darkened room. When your eyes adjust, you make out a pure black lake surrounded by rolling hills seemingly burnt to a charcoal-crisp and glittering with chips of mica. In this *Paysage Foudroye* (or "Thunderstruck Landscape"), you see the exploded, crumbled remains of miniature structures built in a Greco-Roman style reminiscent of the Parthenon or the Coliseum: the small columns have toppled, the broad steps are eroding to dust. Binoculars attached to adjacent pedestals may be used to spy upon this lost world and gain



Paysage Foudroye (Thunderstruck Landscape) by Anne & Patrick Poirier.

a feeling of exploration. According to the artists, the work describes a combat between the Olympian gods and the rebellious Giants, a conflict of order and anarchy that takes place on Earth. The tip of a huge

thunderbolt impales the center of the lake as a symbol of the victorious Jupiter, the force of order. The scene is a metaphor for the conflicts that reign in contemporary society — but that

message is so obvious. While the environment itself holds a certain fairy-tale appeal — adorable, sparkling little ruins — that is the extent of its hold over this viewer. For all its weighty perspective on civilization's

doomed condition, the work is irritatingly simplistic and superficial. On the other hand, in the "culture" side of the exhibition, Jeanne-Pierre Reynaud's simplicity embodies a thoughtful, careful *weltanschauung*. A very white room contains 16 white-metal beds made up with white blankets. Behind each bed hangs a white painting striped with vertical black bars — so empty and so stunning, a manifestation of the same monastic aesthetic that led Reynaud to build his entire house outside of Paris from white tile and black mortar. Like this installation, the house melds elements of the most existential, minimal environment in a manner that also embraces the self-awareness tradition of Zen. Reynaud draws from Sartre and Sehgal, concluding that man's ineluctable alienation may lead to the fullest sense of self. His atmosphere of institutional austerity is a vote for the clearing away of clutter; clean rational structure replaces the false sentiment of historical metaphor. While Reynaud lives in the active political present, the Poiriers opine from the sidelines. (At the Newport Harbor Art Museum, through January 27).

Paintings by Suzanne Caporeal at Newport Harbor Art Museum

Honestly, these paintings are so hokey I thought the artist might be kidding. I wondered if, under the guise of the New Surrealism so popular now in New York, Caporeal weren't trying to make some "art about art" statement, plundering the symbolism of the past to comment upon the futility of such hackneyed message-mongering in the present. What else to make of such pictures? Against backgrounds of dark, rolling seas and ominous storm clouds, Caporeal floats numbers and mathematical formulae written in scarlet, entwined branches. One painting includes a wooden frame that surrounds a crimson, geometric design. Another offers gray stone

diamonds suspended over the choppy green ocean. Although expertly painted, the ideas behind these pictures are so retro you just hope they are attempting high kitsch. Alas, such a reading is too generous. Caporeal's paintings are meant to bludgeon us with reminders that the world is composed of opposing forces: the rational vs. the irrational; the conscious vs. the unconscious; reality vs. fantasy; good vs. evil — all the stuff we learned in Art History 101. Caporeal is at her best with a lighter hand and less literal intentions. *You Lied to Me*, from 1983, depicts a nude figure drowning in a still pool, and is a graceful picture drawn from the realm of dreams. The joy, timeless ambience here creates a jarring resonance that is hard to shake from memory. There is substance worth exploring here, substance that is a welcome antidote to the prevailing fluff of the show. (At the Newport Harbor Art Museum, through January 27).

Pioneers in Paradise

Since the turn of the century, artists and historians from the realm of high culture have been fascinated by so-called naive, primitive and folk art. They were originally intrigued because such self-taught artists were working outside the boundaries of academic tradition — an area of interest to the budding Modernists. The untrained artists were less concerned with rendering a convincing illusion of volume or perspective than in expressing a personal and intimate relationship with the larger world. Usually, their inspiration would be frankly emotional, internal, and often spiritual.

There has been abundant examination of folk art from the East Coast, but this exhibit of paintings, drawings and sculpture by 20 folk artists selected by Susan Larsen-Martin and Lauri Robert Martin is the first such examination of West Coast work. The show, subtitled "Folk and Outsider Artists of the West Coast," is generally endearing and seductive, and proves that folk art holds sway in the contemporary era. We see that folk art still breaks from an academic tradition, but one that is now less concerned with formal issues than intellectual ones. Who in the contemporary art world doesn't wonder about its isolation, its over-educated self-absorption, divorced from the larger reality? Currently, younger academic artists, while demonstrating an impatience with such constraints, still operate from the system of culture. Folk artists are free to draw from nature, from their interior lives, or from the outward circumstances of their lives, but with less critical consideration. Among the highlights of the



Romano Gabriel's carved figures.

show are the works of Peter Mason Bond, a cult hero of San Francisco. *Holiday* is a large painting of Golden Gate Park, populated with mothers pushing prams, children playing, lovers lurching on the grass, and boaters rowing on the lake. In the midst of this idyllic scene, a golden gondola pulled by two black swans bears a lovely young woman. Heavenly light radiates across most of the landscape, buoying up a pair of angels. The woman might be Spring, since she is literally covered with flowers. The painting overflows with good will towards the world. In Alex Maldonado's *A Museum with Sculpture*, the museum is painted as a cathedral that is home to all manner of beasts and human beings frozen on pedestals. In addition to pictures of Eleanor Roosevelt and Angel's Flight (the old trolley car that ran up Bunker Hill), Marcel Cavalla has reproduced the

famous photograph of Marilyn Monroe trying to control her skirts as they blow upward over a subway grate. In the background, however, there are store windows with placards advertising such services as: "Frank Sinatra, Pedicurista." Jim Colclough's glass-topped coffin bearing a wooden creature with nails for teeth and toes is utterly appealing. There are also examples from well-known folk artists: Sanford Darling's South Seas scenes, Romano Gabriel's carved wooden figures, and the famous life-size dolls of Calvin and Ruby Black from Possum Trot (Population, 2) outside Barstow. The show is refreshing, amusing, and lighthearted without being lightheaded. These artists take their work as seriously as any CalArts graduates, but their view of art's function in the world is very different. (At the Long Beach Museum of Art, through January 20.)



Pandora by Suzanne Caporeal.

Douglas M. Parker