

Equal-opportunity exhibit misses an artistic point

'Only L.A.' puts ancestry ahead of actual talent

By Hunter Drohojowska

Should the policies of equal opportunity employment be applied to art exhibitions? That's the real, and only, question posed by an exhibition titled "Only L.A." now on view at the Municipal Art Gallery in Bernald Park.

Artists from a variety of ethnic groups have been given a chance to strut their stuff, and the implied presumption is that they are having a hard time getting noticed individually in the white, male-dominated gallery system.

It all sounds politically correct, but the argument winds up meretricious. "Only L.A." comes off like any other eclectic gathering of less-than-established artists.

This hodgepodge of the good, the bad and the ugly proves that Latin, Asian and black artists are as apt to make lousy art as whites who can trace their lineage to the Mayflower.

Curator Marie De Alcuaz points out in her catalog introduction that L.A. has the largest immigrant population in the country, and that 152 languages are spoken here. No doubt she thought that these artists would be examining the roots of their heritages, would be honing some sophisticated political arguments in their work.

Such inclinations are apparent, but just as many of artists look as if their highest aim is to hang something in the nearest hotel lobby. But then, some are very talented indeed, demonstrating that Latin, Asian and black artists can make art that is every bit as professional and stimulating as that of white artists.

Ultimately, it comes down to the art. Artists are not logged in the history books because of their parentage, their neighborhoods or their living conditions.

Despite the silly premise of this show, some promising new artists are represented, including a self-



Hirokazu Kosaka's "Arrowroot" is one of the works of 27 Latin, Asian and black artists in the "Only L.A." exhibition.

taught Salvadoran Juan Edgar Aparicio. His small reliefs, executed with a subtle, folksy flair, depict politically charged scenes such as Latins detained at the INS center and an altarpiece of the baby Jesus on the knee of a Virgin with her fist raised in the air as a symbol of revolution. Like John Ahearn in New York, who reproduces the characters from his barrio, Aparicio's reliefs are sketches of his observations, and his characters are often believable, their situations moving.

On the flip side, Francesco Si-queiros offers a series of paintings of great elan, loosely based in the surrealist tradition, allowing lines and forms to progress and develop like music. (The artist cites the influence of Kandinsky and "The Sound of a Line.") Each painting is named after a specific hour and is composed of overlapping figurative elements, loopy curves and hard geometrics, the shapes contradicting or complementing one another, but defying context.

The black women in Kerry Marshall's paintings, submerged in shadowy backgrounds, radiate the mystery and dignity of otherworldly figures. "La Venus Negra" is a particularly stunning work, an ebony nude camouflaged against a black background. A curly pattern of vegetation defines her head, which is bowed in contemplation of a tiny scarlet heart — complete with arteries and aorta — hovering in the air, guarded by her two cupped hands.

Stanley C. Wilson's sculptural

installation "Altar for South Africa. Altered Reality, Traditional Power Confined by Sadistic and Morally Disturbed Concerns" includes iconographic Western-style buildings with niches containing black ce-

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ramic hearts and white sticks, perhaps representing bones. Suspended in the air above are carved wooden nudes of men and women, blindfolded. The political concerns so clearly stated in the title are aided in an oblique manner by the appealingly simple sculptural forms.

Hirokazu Kosaka, fairly well-known for his performances incorporating Japanese traditions, has presented two paintings, both simple renderings of refinement and power in gold on black. A videotape of a recent performance is also included.

The remaining 22 artists range from above average to mediocre.

Curiously, some of the more established artists appear quite weak here. John Valadez — usually a pithy observer of the urban condition — has come up with the unsuccessful idea of floating nude female body parts, in primary colors, over dark photographic scenes. The resultant paintings appear to imitate the disjunctive school of David Salle.

Hoon Kwak in the past has drawn from the spare calligraphic techniques of his native Korea, but these recent paintings are mushy and confused.

Armandina Lozano's mimeograph art, incorporating maps and telephone directories, is an idea whose time was past 20 years ago, and it did not age well.

Diane Gamboa's paintings are less expressionistic studies than poorly painted caricatures. The East Los Streetscapers "Death of a Homeboy" is a powerful and well-executed painting, but it is also 6 years old. When will we see new work from this collaborative group?

In the end, however, one is less critical of the artists than of curators who are unable, or unwilling, to search out historical and conceptual motivations behind art and who are content, instead, to organize exhibitions for reasons that must be described as arbitrary.

"Only L.A.: Contemporary Variations, 27 Los Angeles Artists" on view at the Municipal Art Gallery, Bernald Art Park, 4804 Hollywood Blvd., through July 20; 485-4581.



Salvadoran Juan Edgar Aparicio's politically charged picture of the baby Jesus on the knee of a Virgin with her fist raised in the air as a symbol of revolution is among the works on exhibit in "Only L.A." now at the Municipal Gallery in Bernald Park.