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Joyce Lightbody's Work Rises Up From the Ashes : Art: 'Su-pine-Prone/Prone-Su-pine' is the artist's first show since the Malibu fires destroyed her life's worth of work.

May 09, 1994 | HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP | SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Joyce Lightbody is a visual artist with as much interest in music as painting.

Inspired by Conceptual artists who believed that art could manifest itself in almost any activity, for 10 years she composed a cappella choral music. Two years ago, she was invited to compose an instrumental piece for the carillon at UC Santa Barbara. Along the way, she exhibited her scores in alternative and institutional spaces, but commercial galleries remained leery. Until now. Her first solo show in many years titled "Su-pine-Prone/Prone-Su-pine" is at Food House through Saturday.

Food House is known as an ambitious gallery combining the vision of an adventurous alternative space with realistic commercial instincts. It has acquired a significant reputation by showing work by the city's younger artists, many of them just out of graduate school. Lightbody, who has taught for many years at Otis College of Art and Design and at UCLA, found that her students had carried their enthusiasm for her stamp collages to Food House's Randy Sommers. He says, "We felt she'd been unrecognized, especially when seen against the quality of her work, how distinctive it is and how long she'd been working." Other Food House partners Stephen Hartzog and Robert Gunderman had Lightbody as a teacher at Otis.

This is a particularly important show for Lightbody, because all of the work was made since the recent Malibu fires destroyed her home of 11 years. In the fires she lost most of her possessions and, worse, a career's worth of art.

"I've always made little collages for friends, so at least I can go to their houses and see (the work)," she says of the loss.

Although her works were never very large, her collages of the last six months are approximately six by seven inches. They were all created atop a drawing board in the corner of the one-room apartment she now rents from friends in Topanga Canyon. Tiny as they are, they tell an extraordinary tale of transcendence from literal ashes.

"I'm pleased with the scale because it puts the viewer in touch with what their perception is. One viewer has the experience at a time. You can't have a crowd of people standing around these things."

The collages appear at first glance to be simple designs, but after a few moments they coalesce as maps. Land masses are designated by piles of tiny fragments of stamps.

Of her post-fire work Lightbody says, "I think my ability to let pieces just speak for themselves, and take whatever turn they are going to, is easier for me. I

seem to be much more willing to relax into that process and let whatever their content is come out through the process of doing."

Still, Lightbody's version of letting loose is relative. To the casual observer, the work still looks pretty controlled. Using manicure scissors, she has cut out the figures, architectural elements, animals and fancy borders from tens of thousands of stamps and organized them according to subject in muffin tins and tea cups. She determines the structure of each collage through cartographic projections, then decorates with stamps as well as elements of musical composition and phonetic language. In their eccentricity, the works recall the drawings and collages of metaphysical artists like John Cage and Arthur Dove.

"We live in a world where so much is about the transmission of electronic information, it excludes lots of people. I like the idea that the stamp goes on the envelope and still gets from point A to B, where someone opens and reads it. It's very tangible. Stamps don't exclude anybody--unless you count who decides what image goes on the stamp. That process excludes lots of people because it's always the people in power." As an example, she picks up a three-cent stamp of 1953 bearing the slogan "Atoms for Peace."

Lightbody, who is 40 years old, lives up to her fabulous name--a taut combination of ethereal intelligence and earthy pragmatism. Her father was the liberal-minded pastor of a Protestant church. She grew up outside Philadelphia and when she was a junior in college moved to Southern California, in part because her family had moved here. She finished her degree at the College of Creative Studies at UC Santa Barbara in 1974.

"Being raised in a household where I listened to a lot of choral music definitely had an influence" on the work, she says. Yet, the texts for her musical compositions are drawn from distinctly secular sources, such as newspapers or from writers like Bernard Cooper. Her focus is on the sound of the texts, the structure of words and their phonemes. Strict systems organized her early music as well as her visual art.

She is less rigid today, she says, in part because of her keen interest in the methodology of world music. As an example, she cites the structure of the raga in Indian classical music.

"It's set up like the cartographic projections on my collages, in that there are built-in spaces for improvisation, where (they put) the ideas that have to do with sentiment."

For Lightbody, language, geography and music are interwoven disciplines. She says, "The same idea is behind being interested in (all of it)--the plotting of land masses, city states, bodies of water. It's plotting out the unknown, familiarizing yourself, whether by physical cartography or spiritual cartography.

"I like the idea of dichotomy," she continues. "In these pieces, as I go through the last stage of pressing on the stamps, I notice what emerges and what submerges. It's a geographic issue in terms of islands, but it plays with the idea of what is said and what is left unsaid."

** Joyce Lightbody at Food House, 2220 Colorado Blvd., Santa Monica, Building 4, Room 402, through Saturday.*