



TAKE YOUR CHOICE- -Michael Wasn satirizes stereotypes in painting of "Prescribed Ways of Life" at Muni's show of social criticism.
Times photos by Martha Hartnett

ART REVIEW

Probing Society's Skeleton

BY SUZANNE MUCHNIC
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An exhibition called "Artist as Social Critic," at Barnsdall Park's Municipal Art Gallery through Sept. 2, updates a noble tradition. Giants of art history such as Francisco Goya, Diego Rivera, George Grosz and Kathe Kollwitz—who needled their way under the skin of their audiences by stripping away society's cosmetics to expose rickety skeletons and flabby morality—have a contemporary band of followers.

Twenty-six artists, mostly from Los Angeles, attack a host of social evils. Violence, poverty, racism, sexism and political chicanery are stars in a vast case of villains. An extraordinary assortment of paintings, drawings, sculpture and photographs often focuses on today's disregard for all that is not young, white, rich and beautiful.

In Carlos Almaraz's vigorous painting—
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MILITARY MACHO —Marjorie Nadelman paints the military-industrial complex as a glamorized world of rugged men in Muni's exhibition.

A Bare-Bones Look at Society

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ings of Nicaraguan atrocities, Paul Conrad's pungent editorial cartoons, Helen and Newton Harrison's meditative ecological studies and Bruria's scathing "trophies" awarded to governments and corporations that achieve new depths of depravity, we see artists as nerves and eyes of society.

Rush White does poignant "case histories" of psychological estrangement by mixing poetic text with rows of white plaster faces (found in a novelty store) in pristine glassed boxes. Peter Liashkov constructs a grisly picture of Los Angeles in his "real estate" series by combining photographs of rubble and human castoffs with grubby found objects and building materials. White's sterilized sculptures and Liashkov's decaying constructions are stylistic opposites but they touch the same issue—individuals lost in societal madness.

The show is a downer—by definition—but, in an oblique way, it's an upper, too. Problems exposed are monumental and seemingly insoluble. Still, artists' looking, seeing and relating findings and feelings are positive acts. Bits of humor and, more important, the sense that someone cares keep us from rushing out of the gallery and off the nearest cliff.

A Timely Presentation

Social criticism is not one of art's characteristic "isms"—those transient schools or styles belonging to particular eras. Instead, this consciousness is a persistent undercurrent that ebbs and flows but is always there. With widespread return to recognizable images and humanistic messages in the '70s, "Artist as Social Critic" is a particularly timely presentation.

The show covers a wide range of issues and aesthetic approaches, from Michael McMillen's hand grenade, tagged LAX and displayed as a precious artifact, to Masami Teraoka's witty commentary on Japan's westernization in incredibly beautiful watercolors, immaculately executed according to Japanese tradition.

Marjorie Nodelman takes on the military-industrial complex in a wall of bombastic, round canvases—a sort of fisheye look without the lens' distortion. Using a boldly cartoonish style, Nodelman paints a world where all men have prominent jaws and superior knowledge. They make big decisions like where to drop bombs and when to send tanks, all in the name of protecting mere mortals.

Artists, it seems, have peeked into all life's ugliest corners. Photographer Cynthia Anderson cries out against wasting the last moments of the aged in convalescent warehouses. Heads that still house brains and emotions are knots with cavernous eyes on fragile mounds of wrinkles. David Grossman shows a suite of prints called "American Landscape." Here, sleeping transients are crumpled people who huddle beside paper bags holding all their worldly belongings. On the other side of the fence, photographer Anthony Friedkin finds Beverly Hills to be a hollow showplace of gilded appearances.

Encyclopedic View

Michael Wasp takes a piercing look at stereotypical ways of existence. A bum, a middle-class "machine man" and a thinker stand together as uncomfortable specimens in a meticulously realistic canvas. Ben Sakoguchi's view is encyclopedic. He simulates orange crate labels in 60 small paintings, satirizing social practices, current events and art world mythology and drawing sharp distinctions between a showcase "American way" and reality.

Phyllis Davidson sees people as gluttons . . . or garbage in acid paintings where bodies often have a greenish luminescence. Her work, covering six years, gets considerably better technically but little less off-putting as she goes from screaming "RAPE" to seething over aging and Catholicism's trappings.

In short, there's much to admire but little entertainment in this exhibition. You won't find anything to hang over your couch or match your drapes. You will find something worth thinking about.

A delightful show of California folk art, curated by Lois Boardman, provides a therapeutic light touch in the North Gallery.