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Visions of Troubled Times

■ 'Visual Utterances' delves into the Rodney King beating, pollution and questions of quality day care.

By NANCY KAPTANOFF
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

After the riots, economic instability and dire warnings about the condition of our global atmosphere rained on Southern Californians in 1992, many local artists were compelled to create works that convey their thoughts and feelings about the social, political and environmental issues of our time.

Three west San Fernando Valley galleries, in a coordinated effort, are devoting their first 1993 exhibits to a variety of those artistic expressions and to work by artists who have been addressing those concerns for some time.

This week, Artspace Gallery in Woodland Hills opened "Visual Utterances," an exhibit of installations, painting, sculpture, collage, photography and video by 10 artists.

Last month, the Finegood Art Gallery in West Hills opened "L.A. Artists Respond," a mixed-media show of work by six artists, three of whom responded directly to the April riots. On Jan. 25, the Pierce College Art Gallery in Woodland Hills will begin its focus on the dynamics of family relationships and cultural and ethnic backgrounds in its show, "Family."

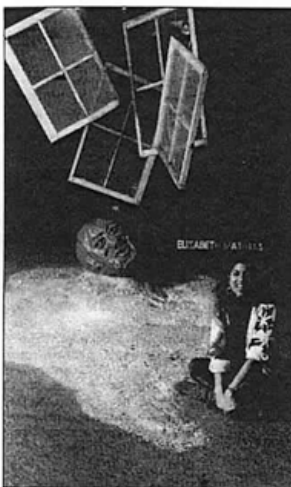
Only one piece, an installation by Elizabeth Mathias titled "Rodney," makes a direct connection to the riots, said Scott Canty, the Artspace exhibit's curator. "We decided to focus on what the riots were about—social, political, environmental problems. People are frustrated with everything."

Guillermo Bert's colorful Impressionistic series of paintings, "Toxic Landscape," incorporates images from paintings by renowned artists (Mascaccio, Paul Gauguin and others) in polluted environments filled with floating oil barrels. The depth and atmosphere of Bert's work are realized through layering acrylic paints, silk-screen textures and oil paints.

I am transforming gorgeous art history into this world that is polluted," Bert said. "You can still see the beauty of the transparency of the water, but then you see the floating cans. Underneath is something that will destroy the



Ed Massey with his "Checkmate." It illustrates American and Japanese cultural differences.



Elizabeth Mathias' "Rodney" incorporates debris collected from traffic accidents.

beauty of the natural way of being, of the world itself."

His installation, "Greenhouse Effects," presents a revolving earth full of garbage that emits smoke into the atmosphere.

In his collages, Peter Breza also comments on pollution's effect on nature, as well as the deadly consequences of the New World Order and the plight of finding quality day care. The woman in charge in "Day Care" has a television set for a head.

Ed Massey's "Checkmate" illuminates the competition between Japan and the United States through a chessboard and sculpted figures: 16 Japanese figures on one side face 16 American ones on the other. The title is actually in Japanese because here the Japanese "have declared 'checkmate' before the first move," Massey said.

"The American lineup collectively reflects the country's decay and steadily deteriorating infrastructure."

That lineup includes inattentive students, a pregnant teen-ager, a homeless woman sprawled before the Statue of Liberty, prison inmates, a black man about to be shot by a black man and auto workers whose jobs are threatened by modern technology. Among these figures, the President stands erect, his attention focused on his opponent.

In contrast, the Japanese pieces represent the "homogeneity and male domination" of that country, Massey said. They consist of the emperor and empress, and 14 nearly identical men bowing in unison toward their opponents.

The rigid structure of Japanese society has benefited the country in many ways; however, it has also stifled creativity," Massey said.

Jean Pinataro's installation "Two-Faced Portraits" presents a many-faceted wall portrait of Ronald Reagan and hanging acrylic paintings of such controversial figures as George Bush, Oliver North, Charles Keating, Richard Nixon and J. Edgar Hoover.

On the front of these portraits are statements similar to those made publicly by these men, representing their "facades," Pinataro said. On the back are sayings made up by Pinataro to express their dark sides.

Mathias started making her installation "Rodney" while watching the trial of the four Los Angeles police officers charged in the beating of Rodney G. King.

Here, a large cobalt-blue ceramic head, cracked open in the back—"separated, decapitated, confused," she said—sits on a mound of shattered glass. Mathias said she collected the glass from the sites of car accidents.

Among the glass shards is the debris of the street—twigs, cigarette butts, wrappers, razors, coins. Dingy windows she picked up from a house in the process of being demolished hang over the piece, conveying the sense of vacant hopes.

Surrounding her installation are Jose Lopez Galvez's poignant black-and-white photographs of homeless and dispossessed people. In one picture, a man lying on the ground reads Esquire magazine.

Dauna Whitehead's double-exposure photographs juxtapose images of riot-torn Los Angeles with stately mansions. A video by Ming-Yuen S. Ma and Tran T. Kim-Trang and two videos by Shin Taniguchi complete the exhibit.

Nancy Kapitanoff writes regularly about art for The Times.

Where and When

What: "Visual Utterances."

Location: Artspace Gallery, 21800 Oxnard St., Woodland Hills.

Hours: noon to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays through Feb. 13.

Related Events: The gallery presents

"Words Across Cultures," a group that

uses theater to foster

better communication

between cultures, and

"An Evening of Poetry" with

Mac McCloud, Leah

Schwitzer, Mary

Armstrong, Nancy

Lambert, Gerald

Hopman and Hakim at

7:30 p.m. Thursday.

"Conversations With

the Artists" will take

place at 1:30 p.m. Jan.

16 and 1:30 p.m. Feb. 6.

"Family Fun Day"—in

which families are

invited to participate in

hands-on projects that

relate to the ideas of

"Visual Utterances"—is

scheduled at 1:30 p.m.

Jan. 30 in the gallery.

Price: All events free.

Call: For information or

reservations to events,

(818) 716-2786.