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ART REVIEW

COLA 2009 an accessible brew in Barnsdall Park

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Municipal Gallery

'BROWN SUGAR': Part of Castillo's installation depicts the artist as a crowd of young women, each dressed in a burlap sack.

The nine winners of L.A.'s Individual Artist Fellowships serve up an accessible brew in Barnsdall Park.

By David Pagel
June 2, 2009

This year's exhibition of artworks by the winners of the city of Los Angeles' \$10,000 Individual Artist Fellowships is better than ever. The sculptures, videos, photographs and one whopper of a painting by nine artists deliver a satisfying mixture of ambition and accomplishment. In nearly all the pieces, these qualities play off each other in ways that make for lively exchanges and leave plenty of room for viewer participation.

Although no theme unites or defines the diverse objects and images that are very simply installed in the rabbit warren of awkwardly proportioned spaces at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery in Barnsdall Park, most of the multilayered works address the relationship between the individual and the group.

That's a big, wildly general idea filled with great possibility. You are able to savor each artist's installation as a show unto itself or to see it as a part of a whole.

Better yet, do both. Art, after all, is one of those rare things not consumed or used up when experienced. Instead, it replenishes itself and anyone who gets deeply involved with it.

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artist Castillo: It consists of 10 floor-to-ceiling columns made of chains and empty burlap bags labeled "Castillo Golden Brown Pure Cane Sugar." The icing on the cake is a three-part digital print that depicts the artist as a huge crowd of emotional young women, each dressed in nothing but a burlap sugar sack and embodying the cliché that there is strength in numbers and a whole lot more.

Eloy Torrez's 25-foot-long painting "To Be Continued" is a panoramic landscape, with a series of portraits depicting musicians, pretenders, masked partygoers, dancers and kids -- folks of all shapes and stripes in search of something out-of-the-ordinary. It's hard to know who is with whom, which makes Torrez's work an apt representation of life in polyglot L.A.

Malleability is at the heart of Shirley Tse's floor and wall sculptures. Made of polystyrene, polyurethane, foam core and cherry veneer, each belongs to her "Quantum Shirley Series," a cartoon-style fusion of physics, ethnicity and self-portraiture. Each playful piece proposes that dumb luck sometimes makes as much sense as any logical explanation.

To make his understated wall works, Joe Davidson uses ordinary strips of cellophane tape, which he layers into shallow bas-relief sculptures that depict ghostly mountains. Even better is his 8-by-12-foot floor sculpture, in which thousands of tiny toiletry bottles have been cast into urethane foam forms. The grid resembles an architectural model of a futuristic city or an upended window display from which all the trademarks and labels have been eliminated, like the flesh from the bleached bones of a beached whale's skeleton.

Natalie Bookchin's "Mass Ornament" stands out as the exhibition's most sustained meditation on individuality and anonymity. With a keen eye for detail, a terrific sense of timing and a killer instinct for editing, she has clipped and combined hundred of vignettes from YouTube and set them to the soundtracks from two 1935 films, Busby Berkeley's "Gold Diggers" and Leni Riefenstahl's "Triumph of the Will." Bookchin's deft selection of highlights is awesome, a powerful instance of making something great from the stuff at one's fingertips in the Digital Age.

To watch the split-screen extravaganza is to feel as if you are at once enjoying a god's-eye view of a vast, everyday parade of vulnerable human beings and also an intimate part of a democratic drama that is deeply moving.

In another gallery, Bia Gayotto's video installation "The Sea Is Not Blue" evokes the romance of melancholy by suggesting that the instantaneous access of global telecommunications is no antidote for loneliness.

Artifice and reality play poignant perceptual games in David DiMichele's clever photographs of tabletop dioramas and Maureen Selwood's enchanting videos. Similarly, Willie Robert Middlebrook Jr.'s hauntingly beautiful abstractions appear to be made of liquid light that has somehow turned fiery, putting you in mind of heaven and hell and everywhere in between.

Overall, one of the best things about all the works is that they never presume artists inhabit some special world apart from everyday reality or are anything other than ordinary folks and regular citizens. Such a down-to-earth attitude goes a long way in explaining their art's accessibility, which enhances, rather than distracts from, its power.

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