

'Shrines' to spirit of life
Hippodrome works celebrate, venerate
By *Dinah Berland*, Art Critic

At a time when the larger culture often seems irretrievably mired in the material world and everyone from political journalists to post-modern artists appear to be more and more cynical, it is fascinating to observe a resurgence of the spiritual quest in contemporary art.

This is not to say that an interest in myth, ritual, icon, fetish and other outward signs have not always been around; they have, especially in Hispanic, American Indian and non-Western cultures. What is different now is that the expressive passion, practices and materials of ancient traditions appear to be re-entering the cultural mainstream and gathering new acceptance in galleries, museums and critical circles.

"Shrines" at FHP Hippodrome Gallery is, to that extent, not just another Christmas show. It is, instead, one small exhibition within a constellation of recent exhibitions across the country – many much larger and more ethnically oriented – celebrating one of the most primal motivations for artmaking: creating a site or object of veneration – an altar, an icon, a shrine.

In a shrine, each individual object takes on symbolic meaning; collectively they take on power. Today's shrine-maker need not be a shaman in the traditional sense, though such artists often rely upon symbol and metaphor to transform ordinary things into extraordinary ones, and typically pay homage to the belief systems that inspired them. Such is the case with the seven artists in this exhibit. All of them – with the notable exception of realist painter Rafael Cauduro – make art with natural and found materials.

Cauduro, a Mexican-born artist, is represented here by one large, fool-the-eye painting. The work incorporates a reproduction of a 15th-century painting of a life-sized crucified Christ lying prone at the top of a tile wall, and another image of a contemporary man that appears to be drawn on a partially erased chalkboard mounted the wall below. In fact, the entire thing is painted on canvas. Seeing this piece alone, which is exceptional in both concept and execution, is worth the trip to the gallery.

The other six artists also reflect the folk traditions of Hispanic Christian art, incorporating skulls, skeletons, candles, crucifixions and complex combinations of common objects in their work. Long Beach artist Gary Elsey makes the most elaborate statement. His largest piece, "The Master of Lunacy Witnesses the Mortification of the Saints, or Los Muertos No Hablan," is as dense, personal and complex as its title indicates. Elsey's work was one of the initial inspirations for this exhibition, curated by gallery director Cynthia MacMullin.

Guatemalan-born artist Alvaro Asturias presents an installation that is both traditional in origin and contemporary in feeling. His thick, richly colored sawdust rug – a ceremonial craft object that is made to be destroyed – is meant to emphasize the transient nature of life. Asturias reportedly was working on the rug up to the time of the opening, just as his forefathers might have as a prelude to ritual, thereby fusing authentic practice with contemporary performance art.

Pat Cox, Eleanor Diehl, Lisa Ferrante and **Linda Vallejo** all make assemblage wall pieces. Cox's work is the freshest and most intelligently conceived with its use of slides and used metal as materials for modern-day icons. Ferrante, who lives in Taos, N.M., holds closest to the Mexican retablo in subject matter, materials and raw color. Each piece incorporates the frame as part of the piece and depicts either a skeleton or crucifixion, often with curious variations, such as the wearing of a thin, black skirt.

In asking why this sort of work is growing in popularity, one need not look very far. If there is a growing hunger – as there seems to be – for art to be more meaningful, then work that is rooted in issues of life, death and the human spirit cannot help but thrive.