

Up Front



—Press-Courier photo by Ed Cicensa

MAKING ENVIRONMENTAL STATEMENT

"Tina," a mixed media mermaid sculpture by Ventura artists Mary Beth Hanrahan and Michele Chapin, features a tail filled with garbage collected at Surfer's Point.

Spirited show highlights women

By LISA MCKINNON
Press-Courier Entertainment Editor

It's not by accident that the three largest pieces in the current Momentum Gallery exhibit are sculptures of women.

"Adriane" is a bigger-than-life conglomeration of worn-out kitchen utensils and household appliances. "Barbara" is a towering gardener created from sturdy wire fencing, her feet firmly rooted in a container of colorful blooming plants. Meanwhile, "Tina" the mermaid rests against an "oil" splattered rock, her green tail filled with garbage collected at a local beach.

The site-specific pieces were created by Ventura artists Mary Beth Hanrahan and Michele Chapin for "A Convocation of Spirits," a six-artist Momentum Gallery exhibit celebrating Women's History Month.

"Actually, that happened super-consciously," said Ms. Hanrahan, a sculptor, prop maker and performance artist. "Michele had heard that Maureen (Davidson, executive director of the Ventura Arts Council and curator of the council's Momentum Gallery) was thinking of doing a show of women's artwork, and I approached her with different ideas from shows dealing with women's issues or all women artists. (Those three pieces) were not sitting around our studio before. In fact, all our stuff was on paper a month ago. But they touch on issues from a long ways back."

With a head covered in plastic curlers and a clutch of broken bathroom scales under her steel wool slippers, "Adriane" represents

a slovenly housewife "stereotype people associate with women that I don't believe exists anymore," said Ms. Hanrahan. "Sure, you see women running around with curlers in their hair, or wearing fuzzy slippers. You or I may have a favorite fuzzy bathrobe we like to wear. But for better or worse, there's more sharing of the household (duties). Yet, I still see this stereotype in the media and know people harbor it in their minds."

The mermaid's message may be more readily recognized by viewers, she added. "She's like this violated woman. Yet, I can't say it's 'them,' because I drive a car. I use oil. So there she sits."

The artists collected trash for the mermaid's tail during an hour-long visit to Surfer's Point, where they found a rusting can of resin, game cards from fast-food restaurant promotions, rubbery beach thongs and plastic detergent bottles amongst the garbage. They molded the rest of the mermaid's body from beeswax, sculpting hollow breasts to hold two glass bowls filled with water and tiny goldfish.

"It's an impermanent matter," Ms. Hanrahan said of the beeswax, "yet garbage is very permanent. It changes form, but it doesn't go away."

The fact that "Tina" and other works in "A Convocation of Spirits" touch on issues that are important to everyone — not just women — is fine with Maureen Davidson, who curated the exhibit.

"This is not a feminist show, but there is a certain stream of thought," she said. "The artists are dealing at various levels with spiritual, emotional and

psychological issues using archetypal, mythological imagery. This is a collection of very individualistic people who have different views about the realm of the spirit; whose images are extremely different, whose technique is extremely different and who use different media."

Gesture toward "Hooded Sentinels," Cynthia Ebin's forest of gray, vaguely human forms covered in textured paper, Ms. Davidson said, "Cynthia's family was caught up in the Holocaust. Her images are very hard." (The Thousand Oaks artist has exhibited works in international museums and in galleries throughout the United States.)

Meanwhile, Bonita Helmer's large-scale paintings are "as rich in meaning as in texture — her images are consciously Jungian," said Ms. Davidson, adding that the Momentum Gallery is showing works from two different series by the artist: "Dark Stages" invites on-lookers into a point-of-view deep within the paintings while the "Plate Series" uses plates and other home-and-hearth items as symbols for the continuum of culture, she said. "Quattor," an acrylic painting with chunks of smooth-edged broken glass mired in the middle of the canvas, features place settings for four, with a bottle of wine and pieces of fruit floating off the shadowy confines of the table. (A California Arts Council Artist-in-Residence, Ms. Helmer teaches at UCLA and at the Ojai Art Center.)

Nature interacts with 20th century life in the artwork of Linda Vallejo, who uses her Chicano background, paper pulp and color to reveal the "spirits" within found pieces of wood, Ms. Davidson said.



EXPLORING ETERNAL SPIRIT OF LIFE

Los Angeles artist Linda Vallejo poses with "Vida Eterna," a sculpture she created with colored paper pulp and small tree branches. The work is included in "A Convocation of Spirits," on view through April 5 at the Momentum Gallery.

In "Sacrifice and Survival," she turns a sturdy tree stump into a physical reference to dealing with and learning from life's painful experiences. One side of the stump has been stripped of bark, rubbed smooth with red pigment and encrusted with colorful jewels. (Based in Los Angeles, Ms. Vallejo has exhibited in museums and galleries on three continents and is a respected juror and teacher.)

In a press release for "A Convocation of Spirits," Ms. Davidson writes, "In the last decade, March was declared 'Women's History Month.' In this month nationwide, exhibitions like 'Nine Women Artists,' 'Feminist Issues' and the like sprang out of every calendar section as gallery directors realized that their schedules showed a slim representation of women. So, in March, women artists had their month in the sun to lapse again into the shadows come April. A new decade ... the imbalance continues ..."

"That's a confessional from me," she said recently. "I'd put together a schedule for the Momentum Gallery, and there were some blank spots. I realized — with a sudden horror — that most of the shows were men. In fact, they were all

men. It's not that we're an equal opportunity employer for artists, but education is one of the missions of this gallery. We're here to increase arts awareness in the county."

In rearranging the exhibit schedule, "the first thing I could carve out was March," she said. "I wanted to set it during Women's History Month as a revelation to myself. I began to think about what women artists have in common and about the work I'd already seen. A lot of the artists I admired were making a sort of spiritual journey as they made their art."

"Not spiritual in the 'New Age' sense," she added quickly. "There's not an aura or a crystal among them. There's a lot of good work in that genre, but there's also a lot of trash. These women are on a serious quest. Their work is a personal exploration, a quest to convey information or knowledge or feelings that have been developed through a spiritual quest."

In her own quest for artists, Ms. Davidson said, "I couldn't encapsulate my idea (for the exhibit) into one sentence, but as I found one

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