

Size isn't the only topic in this 'Big Show'

Bee Art Correspondent

Published Sunday, Dec. 18, 2011

On the face of it, "The Big Show" at Axis Gallery seems an incongruous title. With two small rooms connected by a narrow hallway, the gallery seems an unlikely spot for large works. But the "big" of the title refers to more than size.

Take Phil Amrhein's untitled acrylic on paper composed of black lines and black spray paint, which represents a big change for the artist.

In his earlier work, he made markings that grew into a mesh of lines that became an odd shape. Now he has added spray paint to soften and obscure in places his line-making.

For such a limited monochromatic venture, there is much to see and meditate on in this work, which calls up associations for me with Ad Reinhardt's moving black-on-black paintings, though the lines suggest a subtext related to the marks one makes when counting.

The idea of "big" is relative in Jiayi Young's drawing "Planet Earth," one of a trio of drawings that explore scientific borders. Her "earth" is a tiny dot in the middle of an expanse of white space that makes you chuckle at the concept of "big" in relationship to the vastness of space.

"Big" takes on more conventional connotations in Richard Gilles' large, wide-angle photograph of an empty billboard violated with graffiti. It's an eerie sight, this giant thing made for advertising, standing in an empty field, its purpose violated, or is it ironically fulfilled by the graffiti?

In other instances, the concept of size seems to me to play little part, but the works are interesting enough without the connection. Sandra Beard offers a grid of dark, ashy paper squares with fragmentary texts written on them in white pigment. They hint at dark forces at work in the universe, and it comes as no surprise when, in her artist's statement, Beard cites riots in London as a source for the work.

Joy Bertinuson gives us an assemblage in the form of a box with a fortune teller's head and tiny accoutrements of her trade scattered inside. On the outside of the box, she has mimicked the grain of the wood with a wood-burning tool and punningly designates her mystic as "Miss Fortune."

A pun, too, is at the heart of Ron Peetz's "Carbon Footprints," two pairs of mirrored footprints sunk in what looks like rubber.

Birgitta Franzen McCarthy presents an odd work in which tortured faces and figures appear

out of a steely maze of paper clips. It's a very odd piece, disturbing in its subject matter and handling.

Other works in the show are literally "big" or at least pretty darn big given the small space of the gallery. These range from Janice Nakashima's untitled painting from The Forest Series, which hangs like an Asian scroll, to Cherie Hacker's texturally rich, gestural abstraction "Betwixt the Surface."

Karen Bearson offers a verdant green ground broken by gold rings in "Pentimento," a bouncy abstraction. Cherilyn Naughton gives us two ink and pastel works that seem to reference delicate networks of nerve endings and cellular forms with nuclei in soft tones of rose to yellow.

Shirley Hazlett's "Duetto" is a large acrylic-on-silk work that hovers between painting and sculpture. To the stiffened silk, she has applied rich, deep colors in bold runs of paint speckled with gold that make the work sparkle. It's a bold piece, as is Dixie Laws' largish grid of four monoprints of tall fir trees and bare trunks in stark black and white.

This is a strong show by a group of serious, dedicated artists who run the space on a cooperative basis, supporting the gallery through sales of artwork, contribution of labor and monthly dues. They are free from the constraints of a commercial gallery, meaning that they don't have to compromise their visions to make salable works. The result is a fine history of challenging shows.

© Copyright The Sacramento Bee. All rights reserved.