

Aesthetics of stuff from 99-cent stores

By Peter Frank

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Assemblage — the “art of junk sculpture,” as it was known in the late 1950s when it was all the rage — has been a fixture on the California art scene since the end of the World War II.

Young artists have rediscovered assemblage and make the same social critique with it: Our lives are full of “stuff” we don’t need, and some of this “stuff,” at least, has an aesthetic life of its own.

The difference is that today’s assemblagists, influenced by minimalist sculpture’s severe elegance and the arch wittiness of Marcel Duchamp’s Dada-era “readymades,” create simpler, cleaner structures. Instead of assembling junk, young bricolagistes (to use the French term for patchwork improvisers) choose their elements not in a junkyard but in a 99-cent store.

Bricolagistes Kirsten Morse and Timothy Nolan currently share space with unusual video artist Joseph Santarromana at Angels Gate Cultural Center. The three artists populate the main gallery with odd, poetic extensions of the real world into dream worlds.

Timothy Nolan is the straight-ahead one here. He can combine wrought iron, router blades, cheesecloth and fiberglass into a wall-hung curiosity, something that looks like it should do something but doesn’t. Even more peculiar is the metal socket from which a cascade of ribbons sprouts, a wonderfully menacing conceit.

Nolan’s best work combines fiberglass insulation, plastic shower curtains, talcum powder, metal fixtures, and scented air fresheners into a graduated stack of what look like fluffy pink mattresses.

In her major work Kirsten Morse stacks a dense layer of clothing in a narrow space between a false wall and the real

ART REVIEW

“Solo Series of Three: Kirsten Morse, Timothy Nolan, Joseph Santarromana” and “The Gentler Side,” at Angels Gate Cultural Center, 3601 Gaffey St., San Pedro. “Solo Series” through June 13, “The Gentler Side” through June 20. Wednesday through Sunday 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. No admission fee. For information, call (310) 519-0936. “Site Specific/Sight Pacific,” at Marymount College, 30800 Palos Verdes Drive, Rancho Palos Verdes. Through May 21. Viewable daily until sunset. No admission fee. (310) 377-5501.

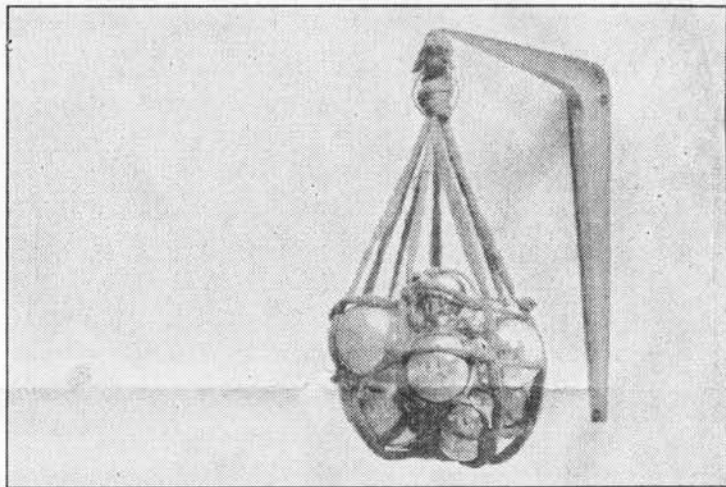
ceiling; a single piece of clothing is inexplicably, enshrined in a small windowed aperture at the bottom of the wall. Morse takes less peculiar but more magical liberty with wearables in her non-installation sculptures, creating cotton and linen dresses that hang from racks, stretching improbably from ceiling to floor or looping around to fuse one with another.

Joseph Santarromana’s medium may be video, but he is preoccupied with “stuff,” too. Stretching his meditative, still-life imagery (including his own body at rest and in motion) across multiple video monitors, and often into the gallery space itself, Santarromana brings us into a world of stillness and not-quite-palpable substance.

Assemblage of the old-fashioned kind predominates in the show occupying Angels Gate’s new annex. “The Gentler Side” features paintings, works on paper and even wholly hand-fashioned sculptures as well, but for the most part it is in the crude potency of found objects — often objects with prior personal meaning to the artist — that the passion of this work truly comes through.

The artists here are all patients at Harbor House, a San Pedro home for the mentally ill. All, that is, except for Orell Christian Anderson, the “professional” artist who led them in collaborative art-making workshops. Anderson exhibits assemblages of his own here, somewhat more sophisticated and self-conscious but no less elusive and surprising than those of his wards.

Another odd group show — odd in material and especially in situation — can be seen around



Timothy Nolan’s “Pugilist’s Prize” is made up of steel wool, Christmas ornaments and a metal wall bracket.

the bend and up the hill from Angels Gate, at Marymount College in Rancho Palos Verdes. “Site Specific/Sight Pacific” consists of 10 works by 11 artists created more or less expressly for the place on campus that each piece now occupies.

I say “more or less” because some of these pieces seem to be stock works from the artist’s oeuvre deposited to particular advantage on one of the rounded hillocks or by one of the campus buildings.

The best works function in most deliberate response to their surroundings — physical or social. Richard Turner’s black and white offset collage of potent 1950s-period texts (including William Burroughs’ “Naked Lunch”) reflects the era of the architecture around it, as well as the eternal spirit of experiment and rebellion even good Catholic-school kids can manifest.

The running greyhounds — cut-out metal silhouettes, actually — John Sanders has set up on one of the bluffs between campus

and sea can just be made out from the vantage of the school itself, reasserting the wilderness of the natural surroundings.

The most engaging piece of all is Susan Brandow’s circular pool sunk into a hillside. A pair of earphones — the cord leading into the pool — waits to be donned. Through the earphones, you hear an asymmetric but not at all unpleasant pattern of clicks and scratches. What you are hearing is a needle rotating around as if on a phonograph’s tone arm, “reading” a three-dimensional rendition of a topographical map of the campus environs. If you hadn’t read this information here, you’d have had no way of knowing this. But the alluring mystery remains even if you know the secret.

The other artists participating in “Site Specific/Sight Pacific” are Kim Abeles, Michael Davis, Catherine MacLean, Karl Matson, Terrell O’Donnell, Joe Soldate, and, in collaboration, Tre Arenz and Jake Gilson.

Peter Frank is a Los Angeles art critic.

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