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## Exploring Power of Three Among Friends

July 04, 1997 | SUSAN KANDEL | SPECIAL TO THE TIMES



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Just as it's (usually) a suicide mission to group of-the-moment artists under the pretext of a theme, it's pretty much impossible to document something as elusive as mutual support and its correlates: conversations deep into the night, gossamer layers of influence (intended and not), casual advice taken too seriously, etc.

So once you accept that the premise for this show of one work apiece by old friends and emerging art-stars Sharon Lockhart, Laura Owens and Frances Stark ("an investigation into the nature of discourse and dialogue among friends") was in fact a non-premise from the word "go," you will probably enjoy things a whole lot more.

Owens' contribution is a painting of a pineapple-esque flower hovering over a fecal mound, cut through with a spindly branch and silhouetted against a background white and bright enough to be the most shocking element of an already very weird (if beautiful) image. Lockhart offers a glossy photograph of the artists in question as the Three Anti-Graces, swathed in hand-sewn sackcloth that, when positioned side to side, composes the image of the California flag. Finally, Stark is represented by a subtly perverse drawing that masquerades as Agnes Martin-style stripes only to reveal itself as alternating rows of red and blue letters.

Each artist adopted a 4-by-4-foot format, something none had used before, ostensibly to level the playing field. It's interesting, however, to see that despite efforts to the contrary, roles inevitably get assigned and parameters twisted.

Lockhart winds up doing the meta-commentary, making her piece either the most or least significant on view, depending on how you look at it. As the sole painting in the show, Owens' work is automatically normalized, despite its obvious eccentricity. Stark's unframed drawing--which at first appears modest, or at least delicate--plays deliberately with pomposity (her text spells out "the foreshortening of the mind's perspective"), thus becoming weighty in its own right, perhaps even more so than the others. In any case, this exhibition is not a competition. Still, competition--like support--should not be underestimated as an impetus for artistic production. Perhaps it would make a provocative non-premise for another show.

\* Blum and Poe, 2042 Broadway, Santa Monica, (310) 453-8311, through July 12. Closed Sunday and Monday.

**Evolving Reality:** In one of the most beautiful images in Michal Rovner's show at Shoshana Wayne Gallery, a figure seems to emerge out of nothingness--the sea? the sky? a deep hole? It's impossible to tell, for all that can be seen, in fact, is a series of dark smears, surrounded by a pale halo, which gives way to a grayish field.

In another set of images, dark rod-like forms, whitened at the very top, spread across the surface, like divers seen from a distance, plunging one by one into the water; or chromosomal bodies, magnified to an absurd scale, coming together, and then falling away.

Sometimes these works look like paintings, with their pale polka-dotted backgrounds, or vast fields of feathered strokes of color. In fact, these are photographic images that have been processed (often enlarged and/or altered) and printed from videotape or computer so that they become documents of documents, something like memories subjected to perpetual retracing, both mystical and chilling.

Rovner's practice sets itself apart from much of the critically minded work of the 1980s, which stressed the photograph's construction of reality, or perhaps more aptly, its propensity to deceive. Rovner does not concern herself with questions of truth, but rather with the lure of uncertainty. The point here, then, is not to elucidate the origin of the image estranged from itself, but rather to luxuriate in its possibilities, in the ways in which the marks we take as its codes are always mutating before our eyes, even when we're not watching.

\* Shoshana Wayne Gallery, 2525 Michigan Ave., B1, Santa Monica, (310) 453-7535, through July 12. Closed Sunday and Monday.



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