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ART REVIEW

## Leaving room for personality

A new Hammer exhibit traces Figurative threads without conformity.

October 20, 2004 | David Pagel | Special to The Times



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If you think that the American political system is churning out presidential candidates whose policies are remarkably alike, then you won't be surprised to learn that something similar is taking place in the art world.

At prestigious American museums and university-affiliated galleries, curators of contemporary art have been organizing increasingly homogenous exhibitions. These conceptually uniform shows tend to put handsomely packaged professionalism ahead of unruly passion, leaving little leeway for personal quirkiness or oddball eccentricity. No late-night Dean howls interrupt the stylistic conformity of such bland fare, which often has all the excitement of a risk-management seminar.

At UCLA's Hammer Museum, a mid-size group show that opened recently bucks this dispiriting trend. Organized by curator Russell Ferguson, "The Undiscovered Country" stands out from the crowded schedule of thematic international surveys because it makes room for a type of individualism that has not been popular since modern art made the idea of connoisseurship unfashionable.

The convivial, often gregarious display of 60 paintings made over the last five decades by an idiosyncratic mix of 23 artists from 10 countries and four generations gives visitors a clear sense of one person's vision: the curator's. What could be a recipe for egomania -- or 1980s curator-as-artist grandiosity -- turns out to be just the opposite: a sustained, entertaining and thought-provoking survey of Figurative painting that is honest about how selective and subjective it is.

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Welcoming visitors with come-one, come-all accessibility, the show is unabashedly partisan: the work of an enthusiast whose love for his subject, a particular strand of Figurative painting that might best be described as damaged romanticism, spills over into the airy galleries, which have not been installed chronologically.

The absence of such New York staples of contemporary figuration as John Currin, Elizabeth Peyton and Lisa Yuskavage alerts viewers to Ferguson's willingness to do his own thing.

The installation is at its best when it mixes works by artists from different generations. The first of seven galleries is exemplary. Four new paintings by three L.A. artists born in 1970 -- Edgar Bryan's "The Ledge" and "Night in the Alte Pinakothek," Mari Eastman's "Porcelain Bowl With Dragon Design and Red Glaze" and Laura Owens' untitled picture of a stylized horse -- hang alongside four works from the 1960s by Vija Celmins (born in 1938), Gerhard Richter (1932-) and Fairfield Porter (1907-1975).

Ordinarily, such setups are meant to demonstrate that the young artists' works are valuable because their pedigree can be traced back to important historical precedents. Ferguson's installation doesn't fall for such lockstep, this-begat-that argumentation.

Instead, the deft arrangement allows the works to talk to one another poetically: commenting, challenging, inflecting and spinning more freely -- and with far more give and take -- than straightforward historical arguments. Together, the works draw viewers into spirited conversations about painting's relationship to masquerade, fantasy, self-portraiture, violence and the daily grind.

Stylistically, the pictures are flat-footed. Emotionally, they're cool and deadpan. Just a touch of loopy dreaminess (or trendy teenage tenderness) enters the discussion via Owens' picture of a white horse and Eastman's image of a red dragon spray-painted on a porcelain bowl.

The grouping is inspired because it's unexpected. Porter, whose reputation pales in comparison to Richter's, is the odd man who suddenly looks in. His seemingly simple "Self-Portrait" packs so much silent eloquence and coloristic subtlety into its tidy geometry that the seven other works seem to orbit around it.

The second gallery adds more surprises. It features works by artists of the intervening generations, including a pair of brushy image-and-text paintings by Neil Jenney (born in 1945), a haunting collage by Kerry James Marshall (1955-), a big picture of an oafish elf in a faded mountain landscape by Peter Doig (1959-) and a pair of casually elegant acrylics by Thomas Eggerer (1963-).

Taking the place of honor Porter occupies in the first gallery is an untitled meaty painting by Philip Guston (1913-1980). More famous than Porter, Guston is less a breath of fresh air than a predictable way for the exhibition to lay claim to painting's fleshy, existential side. The canvas' cartoony theatrics of despair articulate the show's bittersweet tang, touching on its fascination with suffering, self-pity and sorrow without being unduly melancholic. The younger artists' deliriously pretty pictures keep the gravitas of Guston from getting too heavy-handed.

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