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'Flatlanders 3' art show at UC Davis spotlights eight California artists

Bee Art Correspondent

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"Flatlanders 3" is the latest in a series of biennial roundups of artists from the Sacramento Valley. The field was selected by Renny Pritikin, a former Bay Area resident who is the director of the R.L. Nelson Gallery at the University of California, Davis.

Designed to focus on artists who have not previously shown at the Nelson and to identify those who have contributed to the Valley art scene, the exhibition uses a landscape metaphor as its organizing principle. How, it asks, do artists from the flatlands of the Valley differ from their arguably better-known peers in the hilly Bay Area?

One might expect such a show to be full of landscape paintings, but instead, the eight artists in this year's "Flatlanders" turn inward, for the most part, to worlds they have created from their imaginations. The show brings together five longtime Sacramento favorites who, despite living in the Valley, have managed to achieve broader recognition in the Bay Area and nationally, and three lesser-known artists who have made inroads into the local scene.

Jack Ogden and Irving Marcus have long been at the top of anyone's list of Sacramento artists, both having taught for many years at California State University, Sacramento. James Albertson, Suzanne Adan and Michael Stevens are also high on the list of local artists who have made names for themselves outside the area. Less familiar to local viewers are Ianna Frisby, Patrick Marasso and Mitra Fabian, the youngest in the group, who was born in Tehran, Iran, in 1974 and grew up in this country.

Ogden, who is at the top of his form, continues his lifelong quest – to make a great painting. He succeeds in his goal with "XIT," a group portrait of gunslingers from the old West, some of whom bear resemblances to famous artists, among them Pablo Picasso and Philip Guston. Moving away somewhat from the cartoonish Guston-influenced paintings of the past few years, Ogden comes into his own here, recalling such early masterpieces as "Roseland," though in a more direct and simplified form.

Borrowing from old photographs and the 19th century convention of group portraits of artists as done by Henri Fantin-Latour and others, it's an impressive painting, as is the mysteriously titled

"Walter and the Mountain," a scene of what might be gangsters or businessmen in front of factory buildings bathed in a heated red atmosphere that suggests a hell of sorts. "Bleu" is a simpler painting of the artist in his studio backed by an intense blue canvas with a Barnett Newmanesque "zip," a thin vertical line.

Ogden continues to expand his repertoire of artistic alter-egos, abandoning his familiar Jack Tar role for gangsters and gunslingers, equally macho types who do combat with the canvas. These are masterful works by a Sacramento artist who is long overdue for a full-scale retrospective at the Crocker.

Overdue for the same is Irving Marcus, whose decidedly odd, enigmatic narratives take us into a world of murky relationships and exotic locales.

"Brothel" takes us to a mysterious Asian interior where women of the night gather in a bubble of light, a keyhole-shaped interior full of bright shadows. There is a stern madam, a prostitute with a baby and other women in varying stages of undress. While the narrative is intriguing, it is a foil for Marcus' true subject – subtle and always surprising color relationships. Here, the left edge of the canvas is a study in blues, pinks and lavenders in close-keyed hues of similar value.

"Cult" is a scary scene of a sacrificial nude and a devilish horned figure with onlookers, one in a kimono-like robe. But the real play is between the inky blue of the devil figure's mask and the mauves and greens of his costume and the expanse of pale yellow that defines the blouse of a female onlooker. There is so much pleasure in Marcus' witty use of color that you forget the ostensible subjects of the paintings as the paintings draw you in close so that the colors envelop you.

Adan and Stevens are a husband-and-wife team who often show together and felicitously so, for their works complement each other splendidly.

Adan gives us intensely patterned dreamscapes in which ghostlike beings and anthropomorphic animals float in a sea of symbols, letters and numbers. A zebra-like beast takes center stage in "Giddyup (In Memory of Nels Tahti)," a magical, mystical scene with a skinny, skull-headed magician in a top hat balancing a tottering stack of teacups in his hand. Done mostly in black, white and gray, with touches of vibrant color, the work posits a world in which the arcane symbols and cartoonlike characters seem to have deep meaning though their antecedents are hard to pin down.

In "Four H" she gives us a pig-nosed girl in a 4H uniform with a horn spouting from her mouth and another stack of cups rising up. The stippled surface is an intense paean to the importance of craft in Adan's work.

Adan studied with Jim Nutt at CSUS in the '60s and '70s, and the main character of this piece and the long-nosed woman in "Shorthand" bear some resemblance to the quirky faces and figures found in his work and others of the Chicago Imagists, but Adan has plowed her sources under to come up with a startlingly original view.

Stevens is one of the area's most impressive and original sculptors, whose works made of wood are so finely crafted as to be exquisite despite the raw power of their strange imagery. In "The Tourist," a dog's head and canelike tail emerge from a box in which a sinister rabbit is

submerged. The hare's wild eye and pink skin give it a raw and somehow frightening visage that contrasts with the puppetlike head of the dumb dog.

Dogs take center stage in many of Stevens' works, the tail of a pup serving as a sinuous phallic symbol in "Gainsborough's Hounds" winding between the legs of the figure in a found reproduction of "The Blue Boy." "Chop Suey" is a stack of wooden items ranging from suitcases to saws and fish, involving a chair with a dog whose shiny head makes one think of Charlie McCarthy puppets. An ax provides the "chop" part of the melange of images.

In "Roscoe Finds Baby Jenkins Arm," a cartoonish dog perches on a rough tree stump, which ends in a baby's arm, polished like the dog's face to a high sheen. A sword stabbing a fish sits on the base of the sculpture and a small ladder leads the eye up to the dog.

Though the meanings of the pieces are inscrutable, they have a strong and compelling presence and one marvels at the craft and imagination involved in making them.

Albertson gives us raunchily painted images of dolls on a shelf and a clownlike artist painting the landscape he inhabits, sharing the hyperactive space with a crowd of small figures, a Humpty Dumpty-like character on a fence and a monkey in a tree. In "Young Fragonard," he gives us a petulant prepubescent girl with her skirts raised and a boy-child artist in a swing in a satire of Fragonard's most famous painting.

It's a parodist's dream, as is Albertson's "A Boy's Life," a scene of a young cowboy in a saloon with a dancing girl. Examples of the school of "Bad Painting," which came out of a landmark exhibit at New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art, they are, as Pritikin notes, both "funny and moving" and "scandalous in ... scorn for the standards of good taste."

The younger artists in the show have a lot to live up to. Some connection exists in the humor that infuses their works as well as that of their elders. As befits younger artists, the humor is of a sarcastic sort. Marasso gives us a series of paintings based on snapshots of 1960s-era parties of sad-sack adults trying to have fun. They are poignant to a degree but tackiness wins out as the predominant quality on display.

Frisby also takes a cynical stance in her embroidered images of models on the covers of dressmaking patterns. There is an irony in the occasional richness of the stitched surfaces in contrast to the flat, schematic drawing of the figures and their rather banal clothing.

Fabian scores with an unexpectedly elegant wall piece made up of black and silver clips for holding manuscripts or large stacks of paper together. Dripping and looping on the wall like the bobs of chandeliers, they have a luxurious jewelrylike quality and put an unusual material to surprising ends.

FLATLANDERS 3

WHEN: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Thursday; Friday-Saturday by appointment, through Aug. 15

WHERE: Nelson Gallery (Room 124, Art Building), UC Davis

COST: Free

INFORMATION: (530) 752-8500

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