



L.A. Confidential

by Eve Wood

Blessed with a day off and the sun at my back, I made my monthly pilgrimage to the Chinatown district in downtown Los Angeles, home now to at least a dozen hip, young art galleries, not to mention the **Mountain Bar**, designed and co-owned by **Jorge Pardo**, the art-world's own design artist. Most of the galleries are located not on the street but on a kind of open pedestrian mall, cheek to jowl with dumpling restaurants and Chinese tchotchke shops. The place is pretty quiet during weekdays, perking up considerably on the weekends. My traveling companion was my little dog **Flan**, a long-legged Chihuahua who is by all accounts an art star in his own right.

At **Mary Goldman Gallery**, which opened five years ago, New York artist **Charlotta Westergren** was busy installing a show of her new works, a set of four oil paintings of goats done on large (40 x 84 in.) horizontal monochrome panels covered with shiny car enamel. In the spirit of **Alberto Giacometti**, the artist was hard at work making some final adjustments to one picture, painting a string of pearls in the lower right corner.

Titled "Princely Portraits in the Caprine Court and a Band of Merry Men," the suite of paintings touches on both the mythic and the comic. The goat is a symbol of sensuality, fertility and grandeur, though Westergren's rendering of these animals -- rare breeds that were something of a fad in 17th-century courts -- gives them an almost "late night" personality. *Knave*, for instance, seems nearly ecstatic with some private joke, as he cocks his huge head to one side and purses his fat lips in a smile.

When I asked Westergren what prompted her to depict exotic livestock -- her previous works have included paintings of deep-sea fauna as well as colorful sugar sculptures of flowers -- Westergren promptly produced a picture of the interior of the German palace of **Weikersheim**, the walls of which were lined with all manner of beasts. "One of my obsessions is 16th and 17th century taxidermy," she said. They can be yours for \$20,000 each.

Up the block was **Peres Projects**, where proprietor **Javier Peres** had installed "Gods & Monsters," a group show of works by **Folkert de Jong**,

Andrew Mania and **John Kleckner**. Centerpiece of the show was de Jong's sprawling sculpture, a hideous tableau carved from baby blue Styrofoam and splattered with bright pink paint. A Sadean figure with a **melted ochre face** stands over a rickety table which is strewn with the remnants of a cannibalistic meal; under the table are the bones of the dead (and a lute).

Across the room stands a ram, its forelegs on an upturned milk carton, its pink Styrofoam tongue protruding, a pink AK 47 leaning against its body. De Jong (b. 1972) is from Amsterdam, and the work has both Neo-Goth and political overtones. Needless to say, my dog Flan was ready to fight. Bark bark! More receptive was L.A. supercollector **Dean Valentine**, who had snapped up the work a day before the opening -- that's how you do it in today's art world. Valentine was delighted with his acquisition, despite its non-archival materials. The price was something like \$20,000.

Also on hand was the young artist **John Kleckner**, who lives and works in L.A. His detailed ink and watercolor drawings show admirable control, and have an early Netherlandish feeling. A large (50 x 63 in.) drawing depicts a pregnant nude woman in a landscape, clasping her breasts, her hair strung like a web in the branches of a tree. A bearded "wild man" looms up behind, apparently arising from her hair (or perhaps thin air, as he has no feet). The woman seems truly transfixed by her own desire. This drawing too had sold before the opening, for about \$7,000.

Rounding out the show are **Andrew Mania's** smaller portraits of young men done in colored pencil on veneer. Fashionable and elegant, the heads float disembodied on the page, like Caravaggio decapitations. The flowing hair and pink lips give the young men a distinctly androgynous quality.

Grotesquerie seemed the subject of the afternoon as Flan insisted on trotting around the corner to **Sister**, the gallery launched by **Katie Brennan** on Gin Ling Way a year ago or so. Amy Sarkisian's installation, "I Love Livin in The City," is a creepy indictment of the human psyche gone berserk. The narrow gallery space is dominated by *Brawny Guys*, a lifesize plaster and foam realization of the man from the Brawny paper towel label. He sits plaintively considering his own image on the facing cardboard television, while holding another version of his own head, the strained face gazing back at him.

As if *The Three Faces of Eve* (1957) were set among the towering redwoods, *Brawny Guys* captures the pathos and absurdity of a fictitious yet bizarrely iconic character. As Sarkisian imagines it, this is a man

whose "brawnified" personae is at odds with a deeper, more sinister longing to uncover his truest self. The price is about \$10,000, while a compelling work on paper from 1999, titled *Fear Collage* and presenting some Goth Rock lyrics surrounded by corona of smiling WASPS cut from a J. Crew catalogue, is a bargain at \$2,000.

Next, Flan and I braved the oncoming rush-hour traffic to cross over to the **David Kordansky Gallery**. Rarely do I return to a show three times, yet the exhibition of **Samara Caughey's** sculptures did the trick. Small abstract constructions made from organic materials including string, logs and strips of canvas, these works have the quietude and complexity of a small poetic moment. In *Flightless*, a small wing-like sail is attached to a log that sits on the floor. The work appears rooted, landlocked, yet the sail takes flight, a symbol of transcendence and freedom. Caughey's sculptures are generous, necessary and true. Prices begin at \$3,000.

Next door at **Daniel Hug Gallery** was an incredible sound installation by **T. Kelly Mason** inspired by **Michael Heizer's** pioneering earthwork, *Double Negative*, a 1,500-foot-long, 50-foot trench cut across the edge of a Nevada mesa. Mason's version consists of a set of chambers, rather feebly constructed from masonite, conduit and hanging movers' blankets, but its reality comes from the accompanying sound. Mason traveled out to Heizer's piece, where he set up his tape recorder and performed a series of activities that produced a kind of aural map of Heizer's artificial landscape.

As you wander through the gallery construction, you can actually feel the space widen and shrink back in on itself as the sound increases and recedes in volume. "Using audio equipment to create space," indeed. The show also includes several works in which the artist has written words directly onto the canvas, as though he were giving the world its final orders.

EVE WOOD's new book of poetry, *Six* is due out this month. She currently has an exhibition of her paintings and sculptures at Western Project in Los Angeles.