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Complementary Visions

Converging styles of two Valley-based painters take viewers to the outer limits of their genres.

March 19, 1998 | JOSEF WOODARD | SPECIAL TO THE TIMES



Two artists based in the Valley have converged on the Orlando Gallery this month, and they take distinctly separate paths to the far side of realist or figurative art. Judit Csotsits has developed a captivating personal style grounded in abstraction, while Irene Nowicki creates a world where biomorphic surrealism is king.

Somehow, their two very different approaches find a way to get along in the same gallery. In a sense, they meet by virtue of what they avoid, and by the effort of finding an artistic world of one's own.

Here Nowicki shows a tighter and more cohesive selection of work than last year's free-for-all sampler at the old Artspace Gallery. There, the artist came across as a hopeless eclectic, trying out multiple directions in search of a focus. The focus here, with a series called "Taurus Light," is on the evocation of dreamlike dimensions, where visual relationships are fluid and reality is moot.

In these paintings, she pushes around blob-like forms and extroverted color schemes. The sum effect is often an illusionary sense of three-dimensionality, with ambiguous objects flung into murky spaces. Elsewhere, more of a sense of pure, flat design prevails.

"T-Time Violet" depicts a squirming, gelatinous organism set against a background pattern of purple leopard skin. It puts us in mind of early '70s graphic sensibility, as if this is art influenced by lava lamps and micro-close-up films of cell division.

We get glimpses of references to familiar images, whether hints of floral subjects or the rationality of architectural space. But they remain hints, teasing the eye into unfulfilled interpretations. That slippery relationship to meaning or purpose defines both the art's strength and its limitations. You get the sense that the artist is still actively working through an aesthetic, without having arrived quite yet.

Csotsits' paintings are something else again, more controlled and narrowly defined in their means of expression. And those means are as strangely appealing as they are diverse in their references. Her work looks at once ancient in its decorative flourish, and contemporary in its neo-psychedelic designs.

Some of the smeared paint effects recall the childish glee of "spin art," in which paint is dripped onto paper swirling on a turntable, creating instant color kaleidoscopes. But there are other aspects of culture, fashion and art theory at work here, too.

Recurring motifs of tangly, curling tendrils put us in mind of the gaudy, embossed wallpaper of Victorian chic, the echoing patterns in fabric prints, or the ornate design aesthetics from Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Nevertheless, she doesn't allow the decorative subtext to reign: Tension between elements gives the art its energy and power of provocation.

The dramatic "Orgy of Color" is a large square painting in which the dichotomy is especially pointed. There's a battle going on. The fluid grace of her ornamental patterns is undermined by an unsightly, bulging pocket of yellow paint, like a wart rising from the surface. Surges of unruly visual activity also rush into the composition like drunken boors at a soiree. It's beautiful, in a sturdy, conflicted way.

Most of all, Csotsits' art resonates because of the uniqueness of look and function. She seems in control of a visual world of her own devising, a world that is also about surrendering control.

BE THERE

Irene Nowicki and Judit Csotsits, through March 27 at Orlando Gallery, 14553 Ventura Blvd., Sherman Oaks. Gallery hours: 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Tuesday-Saturday; (818) 789-6012.



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