

LOS ANGELES TIMES

ART REVIEWS

By JAVAN GEER
Special to the Times

Jack Butler: An Eye for Hidden Social Issues

Advertising is the comfortable refuge of any number of stereotypes and generalizations. Just how loaded these pictures are with additional messages occupies the work of artist Jack Butler. Subverting advertising's goals and type, Butler's work is a field for contemporary artists like himself. Butler shares their interest in identifying social issues buried beneath ad campaign's allusions.

Butler began using text and media photographs in the early '70s to ask questions about the media presentation of social norms. Later, his painted photo collages concentrated on the media and advertising's exploitation of the female's latest body of work: line up

models taken from advertisements of the '60s and '70s. On the surface they have that white-headed blond purity that we were raised on. But Butler's work, innocent in theme, reveals a grimy, gritty world. What he wants to uncover are the threats of socially supported physical and psychological violence within the American family.

Violence runs the gamut in these pieces from children ignored by their adolescent parents in "A Child in Bed" to straight-out abuse in "A Child of Appetite." Where the violence of physical abuse is most clear, the work is perhaps easiest to understand. But it is in the more subtle pieces, such as the shape of a man's face in "The Spoken Functions of an Ex-Boy" or the social fashioning of domestic femininity in "Fetters in the Pain of Grief," that the work speaks most thoughtfully of the institution's role of pain and social pressure.

Also on view are James Balog's stunning dye-transfer animal portrait photographs from his "Survivors" series. These images of some of the world's nearly extinct animals are different because Balog doesn't give us the usual colorful, animal-roaming-proudly-in-the-wild look of these vanishing beasts. Instead, he positions them up in front of photo backdrops and shoots away. Occasionally, he includes enough of the real surroundings to further stress the artificiality of his setup.

The confrontation between these creatures and the camera becomes a troubling metaphor for the battle between animal and man. The started confusion on the face of the "Florida Panther" is stunning even if it is amusing. The tiny black-and-white gazelle sitting on the photo set in the middle of a huge Western-style Chinese assembly hall looks vulnerable and insignificant. Balog's wild animals

have a profound dignity. It's a document of grandeur that will be the only trace many of the species soon leave behind.

■ *Photo/Elect. Gallery, 148 N. La Brea Ave., Los Angeles, to Feb. 22.*

Dale Robb: Michael Hickman has always had a predilection for purple and psychological narratives. But the earlier enigmatic mix of myth and reality that gave many of his paintings their edge has given way to an almost straight rebirth of stories from the Bible. There are hints that Hickman is using these paintings to be contemporary metaphors, the first being the figure in the "Baptism," suggests the first in the rain forest. But there are enough of these kind of suggestions to make that connection more than rudimentary.

If it wasn't for the tiny black-and-white enshrining such crutch

pointed images, these scenes of naked figures getting endangered wild animals or falling to snakes in a forest would be too superficial to contemplate. The deliberate darkness wraps up the banality in a thick veil. In "The Patience," one of the few clearly modern pieces, seems to be reaching for a prophetic connection between the mark and environmental contamination. Unfortunately, the connection is too tenuous to cling to.

■ *Orlando Gallery, 1455 Ventura Blvd., Sherman Oaks, to Feb. 22.*

Pulling Together: There is less awe, but the excitement in "Max DeWane's" latest bronze sculpture. The figure seems to have quite literally pulled them selves together. Fusing the inspiring confidence that energized the work a few years ago, these favor a more solid, muscular presence. Missing is the peeling open of the thick bronze slices of earlier works. They pried open the figure and revealed the cooling process. Suggestions of this can still be found in the clean, deep slices at joints and neck. But the incision now read more like decomposition than creation. These

are figures missing on their own demise and making peace with it. Most accomplished in the life-size "Magdalena," a sacred and decaying semi-nude figure whose perfect composure skillfully belies the desperation of her body.

Most of these figures are small. But they are not at all the pudgy studies of perfect figures such as Robert Graham's statue. For all their careful proportioning, they reach for more realistic depiction. That romance sometimes gets muddled for truth as in the pinched, trench-coated man with wings, "Savior." This piece looks like a joke advertisement for the movie "Heaven Can Wait." That the statue of emotion and psychology—they can quickly degenerate into emotional illustrations. Even Stephen DeWane's tough approach to the reality of death and loss will sometimes slip into empty formula. Yet the artist's efforts to whip ephemeral emotion from the cold strictures of bronze and stone are welcome within the cool industrial climate surrounding contemporary figurative sculpture.

■ *Wagner Gallery, 828 N. La Brea Ave., Los Angeles, to March 11.*

AT THE SAN DIEGO GALLERIES

Undertones Are Key to Installations

By LEAM OLMAL
Special to the Times

SAN DIEGO—Like much current art with a social agenda, the wall installations of Paul Maurice feel didactic and cool. They aim to engage, with their accounts of racism, injustice and violence toward blacks, but their tactics are restrained, often to the point of full indifference.

The Portland artist's work, now at South in a two-person show with Tigran artist Hugo Sanchez, has powerful and ominous undertones, but these emerge to their fullest only in one of the works on view, "Branch." Here, as in most of Maurice's work, a text panel leaning against a wall describes an actual incident involving the mistreatment of blacks.

The story is told of a black prisoner denied a trip to the bathroom. The denial led to an argument, which led to his being chained, gagged and his head taped and bandaged in punishment. Ultimately, the prisoner died of asphyxiation. Maurice recounts the incident in direct, reportorial style, with no sugar-coated affectation. Instead, he expresses his outrage at the racism latent in today's law enforcement by creating a parallel with the past.

Across the wall supporting the panel, Maurice has mounted a large tree branch, fastening it to the wall with the kind of industrial-strength tape used, perhaps, to evade the prisoner's head. Above the branch, Maurice has written the words, "We don't hang them anymore."

This phrase, in conjunction with the 1988 account on the text panel, states effectively in claims that equal justice for blacks has improved or even arrived. Maurice makes it clear in this potent pairing that the situation is as bleak as it has ever been—only the methods of suppression have changed, from blatant, public execution, to more subtle, institutionalized forms of torture.

Maurice's other works in the show similarly combine wall texts with enlarged photographic reproductions and real objects, such as shoes, shirts and bags. None give the viewer as poignantly as "Branch," however, with its eerily, once-dying branch pressed to the wall in forced submission. The dried, drooping leaves give the prisoner's emotional death an urgency and powerful, metaphorical presence.

Hugo Sanchez's painted mural on unstretched canvas, as well as

BARBARA MARTIN FERRERO / Los Angeles Times

Attendant Heidi Ott looks at an untitled mural by Tigran artist Hugo Sanchez that is on display at the South Gallery in San Diego.

his etchings and pastel drawings are also thick with metaphor and symbol. But, unlike Maurice's work, the links between these painted realities are not clearly defined. Sanchez evokes the political and historical drama unfolding in Latin America in his visually rich and striking works, but more concrete meanings remain elusive as the viewer unfamiliar with these continually evolving plots.

Sanchez's large mural is untitled, but its imagery and theme are related to an etching nearby, entitled "La Ultima Cosa de America Latina" (The Last Thing of Latin America). In the middle of the mural sits a Christ-like figure, with the silhouette of Mexico, Central America and South America imprinted on his torso. His torso glows before the dynamic swirl of activity and emotion around him—the superman figure, with hammer and sickle emblazoned on his chest, the flame-breathing horse, the crucifixion, the sun and moon, and the flying contraption bearing a flag with the word "Mexico."

An untitled pastel drawing by Sanchez also features a dense mosaic of human forms, rendered in a vigorous palette of greens, violets, greens and yellows. The drawing's color and its contrasting figures evoke a passion and turmoil even more extreme than the mural. All of Sanchez's works here are absorbing, however, vague their

interpretation, for the artist assumes the culture's character with a perfect mix of earnest and sincerity, pain and pride.

■ *Which artist's work remains on view at South, 828 N. La Brea Ave., San Diego, through Feb. 22.*

Wall Works: "Objet d'Art," at the Thomas Barber Gallery, features new wall works by San Diego artist Jay Johnson and Robin Briggs. Both artists share a preoccupation with formal issues of surface, mass, line and shape, but in his most recent work, Johnson reveals new intricacies, psychological and social concerns.

Johnson's 1991 wall sculptures trade the elegance of his earlier, copper-sheathed works (several of which are on view here) for a more casual, quirky humor and extend his playfulness with form into a new arena of verbal-visual play. In his "I Ball," for instance, Johnson has painted the letter J in various styles across the surface of a wooden sphere, charred the bottom of the sphere and mounted it high on the wall, with a black tassel hanging from the metal mouth. Delightfully acrobatic in its references, "I Ball" is something of a self-portrait of the artist, equating the round eye with the J of his identity, as represented by his tassel painted on the sphere.

of sex, commerce, desire and despair is connected tightly in Tigran's clubs and dance halls, according to the newest body of work by San Diego artist Heidi Ott.

The milieu that Guerrero defines in his paintings and drawings now on view at the David Ziegler Gallery in San Diego through Feb. 22 is, indeed, gritty, but also otherworldly and fantastic, a realm of surrealism and escapism.

"Aspects of Vida Nocturna en Tijuana B.C." (Aspects of the Night Life in Tijuana B.C.) is an engrossing, difficult show. Guerrero's intense, burning palette and his fluid painting style are easy to see, but the subjects are often harder to swallow. Women performing nude on stage, subject to the groping hands of the club's male patrons. Others dance for a price, but not necessarily with a smile. And men collapse in the bar after too many beers.

The psychological and sociological dynamics of these situations are not easy for the outsider to discern, but they begin to reveal themselves in Guerrero's larger, more complex work.

In "Club Guadalajara de Noche," for instance, scenarios of bought and real affection are played out across 14 feet of canvas. At the bar area, on the right, a man carrying a stack of bars for sale and two women display their wares with equal, casual candor. Guerrero paints both of the women in electric color, with red and purple hair, their skin glowing green and blue.

On the dance floor script from them, couples move brightly in a canopy of colored balloons, which conflict. Several women, at tables, wear the glazed, disorienting stare that comes with being drunk, while others seem, fully willing in spite with their eyes. The painting seems a strange, almost surreal, scene. Please see GALLERIES.

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