

Art Review:

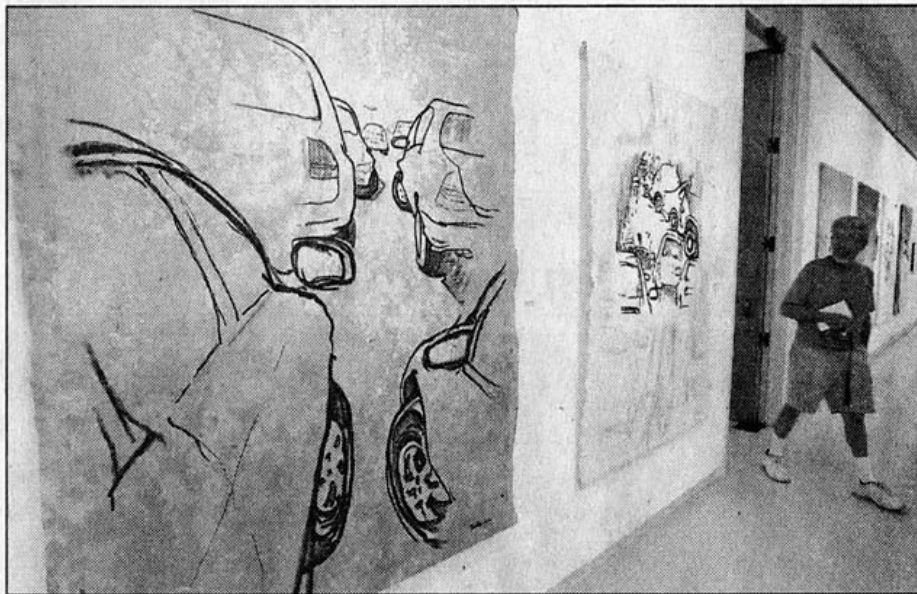
Where urban life is sacred

November 24, 2009 | By Melonie Magruder

Excerpted:

Srboohie Abajian's auto portraits of oil monotype and acrylic on raw canvas show tiny human figures lost in a forest of huge automobiles — a perfect metaphor for the Southland zeitgeist.

Abajian paints on unstretched canvases, and the results have a pleasing tactile sense. The wry humor implicit in her depiction of auto-obsessed L.A. begs the question, "Does a pedestrian even stand a chance?"



ROGER WILSON *News-Press*

A library patron looks over work by artist Srboohie Abajian that is currently on exhibit at the Brand Library Art Galleries in Glendale.

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The contemporary urban designer Paul Murrain said, “We cannot continue to believe that the landscape is sacred and the city profane. They must both be considered sacred.”

The new exhibit at the Brand Library, “Metropolis: Prospects & Observations” illustrates this sentiment by showcasing five artists whose vision of urban life finds beauty and context in oft-overlooked perspectives of our concrete jungles.

Photography, oil on canvas, ink and crocheted stainless steel illustrate these local artists’ interpretation of our urban landscapes, with man-made influence decidedly controlling the environment, rather than the other way around.

John Smith’s excellent silver gelatin prints show a gritty City of Angels at its best, shot during what he calls that “civil twilight,” the half-hour before the sun peeks over the horizon.

Lonely shots of Randy’s doughnut shop near Los Angeles International Airport or staples covering a telephone poll, like monarch butterflies clustered on a eucalyptus tree, show a texture not seen in daylight hours. A white dress in sharp focus in a well-lit shop window gives life to an otherwise empty street. The Toronto subway is not just an underground tunnel, but a solitary and epic journey.

Smith cites Ansel Adams as a big influence, and his black-and-white images of otherwise seedy liquor joints or highway overpasses converging in graceful solitude are made magical by slow exposure film that creates starbursts around street lamps.

Don Saban also uses photography to find the sacred in the profane of late-night Los Angeles. His archival pigment prints of L.A.’s various neon-lit movie theaters bring intense carnival color to the art-deco architecture.

“Paradise Motel” does, indeed, look heavenly in purple neon, even with a guy leaning in to the office window trying to negotiate a cheap room rate.

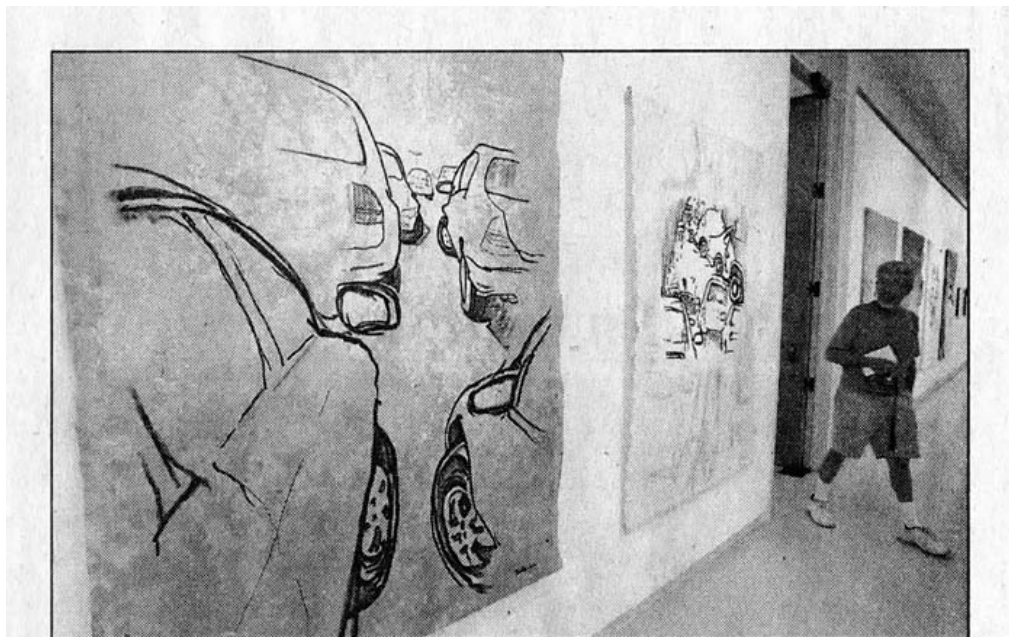
“El Rey” shows that Wilshire Boulevard theater in bright Mexican-flag-colored lights, and “Circus Liquor” contrasts a cheesy, neon-lit circus clown beckoning before a marquee reading “God Bless America.”

Saban’s love of kitsch memorializes such L.A. landmarks as Tail o’ the Pup and Tommy’s hamburger shack. He even makes a McDonald’s look like Candyland.

Matthew Cramer finds beauty in the indistinguishable boxy design of orange and green structures that could be apartment buildings and could be railroad cars.

In speaking of his recent works, Cramer said they were about “a contrast between density and open space,” and he explores it.

Cramer’s titles, like “Asset Aggregation Bunkers” or “Diffusional Consumption Pods,” lend a futuristic anonymity to his vision of man in an urban setting. His oils on canvas, like one depicting a bank of news microphones set up for a press conference, further underscore the human featurelessness of contemporary metropolises.



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Srboohie Abajian's auto portraits of oil monotype and acrylic on raw canvas show tiny human figures lost in a forest of huge automobiles — a perfect metaphor for the Southland zeitgeist.

Abajian paints on unstretched canvases, and the results have a pleasing tactile sense. The wry humor implicit in her depiction of auto-obsessed L.A. begs the question, "Does a pedestrian even stand a chance?"

Finally, Renée Azenaro takes two utterly modern building materials — steel and aluminum — and weaves them into sculpture that is as much a commentary about defining space as allowing space to flow around it.

Once again, Brand Library Art Galleries give a masterful statement on artistic vision in modern-day society.

MELONIE MAGRUDER is a journalist whose background in art appreciation was shaped by way too much free time with season passes to museums all over Europe.

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