

Preening and Posing

Lori Markman's evocative, eccentric portraits of women are anything but boring.

By JOSEF WOODARD
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

It's hard to get a sturdy grasp of Lori Markman's art, now nestled in the upstairs gallery of Natalie's Fine Threads. This is not to make a disparaging value judgment: her work, often eccentric studies of female figures, goes both ways, and then some, suggesting a juncture of frothiness and angst. They can be dismissed as casual flings or admired in the way they stretch figurative conventions and dabble in Cubist and surrealist approaches. It's your choice.

Often, the women Markman portrays seem to be in states of ecstasy, preening or otherwise posing. The artist, too, tends to pose and pinch nerves of expectation. Certainly, that's the case in "Girl with Gun," a lanky female model with revolver in a holster, on a cocked—and cocky—hip. "The Baseball Game," placed on the wall of the stairwell as you go up to the second-floor gallery, finds a bikini-clad figure in the foreground, with a baseball game almost as an afterthought in the distance behind her.

The visually stressed-out figure in "Woman Having a Nervous Breakdown" is beyond the verge thereof, her lines and volumes in a contorted tangle. The scratchy intensity of the artist's rendering here nearly goes into the domain of Francis Bacon's psycho-sexual portraiture. Yet, still, an air of giddy delight keeps the desperation at bay.

Elsewhere, Markman explores more purely artistic ideas, as with "Spanish Dancer," its figure seen through a prism of gentle-spirited abstraction. And in two untitled paintings and "To D, Love L," the artist pieces together a surreal tableaux, nodding to De Chirico's sense of imaginary space. In these dream-like vignettes, patches of geometry and female anatomy are mixed, matched and tossed into an irrational salad of imagery.

With this work, Markman throws ideas against the wall, and many of them stick. Suffice to say, her art is anything but dry and academic.

PIECE BY PIECE: Helle Scharling-Todd is one of those artists whose work may be more familiar to locals than we even know. Her distinctive mosaics grace the Port Hueneme and Wright libraries, as well as the Chumash Learning Center in Moorpark.

In the tighter confines of a gallery show, as seen in the current one-person exhibit at the Buenaventura Gallery, the artist's mosaic and sculptural instincts take on a more personal, intimate presence. They are open to interpretation, as well: stark, outlined figures



in her mosaics here evoke both the joyous everypersons of Keith Haring's art and the darker impression of body outlines at murder scenes. The figure in "Caught in the Wire," for instance, is enmeshed in orange snarls of wire, apparently in a somersault that may or may not be voluntary.

"Man in Various Positions," hung on the wall in this gallery's secret nook, is a series of seven small mosaics, showing a blocky figure in different gymnastic positions. It's a whimsical series, especially as seen in this tight, vertical corner. Whimsy can even be found in the presumably grim "Chaos in the Circuit," where converging lines run like badly-behaved cross-currents in the composition. The chaos in question is a pleasant one.

Scharling-Todd also shows several of her more abstract sculptures, fashioned from milky, green-ish glass, and alluding to portals (including body portals) and crystals. As with her use of mosaic, her sculptural material is also off the beaten path, but not so far that we lose sight of a fundamental gentility.

DETAILS

Lori Markman, through February at The Upstairs Gallery, Natalie's Fine Threads, 596 E. Main St., in Ventura. Gallery hours: 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m., Tue.-Sat. Phone: 643-8854.

"Glass & Mosaics—Public and Private," works by Helle Scharling-Todd, through Feb. 27 at Buenaventura Gallery, 700 Santa Clara St., in Ventura. Gallery hours: 11 a.m.-4 p.m., Tue.-Sat. Phone: 648-1235.