

'Cream' at Arts Benicia

By Chérie Louise Turner

An annual exhibition, *Cream—from the top* culled a selection of work by recent Bay Area MFA graduates from Mills College, UC Davis, UC Berkeley, San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI), California College of the Arts (CCA), Stanford University and San Francisco State University (SFSU). The show is as much about the artists as a snapshot of what's happening in the region's fine arts programs. "I don't pick just what I like," says Kathryn Weller-Renfrow, the show's curator and the artistic director of Arts Benicia. "I try to represent what's going on."

Cream was conceived five years ago by artist and CCA professor Mark Eanes. This year Weller-Renfrow assessed the works of roughly 200 artists which she whittled down to fifty-five, and then the final eighteen on show (her goal was fifteen). In choosing the final few, Weller-Renfrow notes that she was looking for a "strong voice," "honed craft" and "a cohesive, achieved body of work."

She describes the MFA programs as "wildly diverse" and filled with artists whose work "trends toward being less of a trend." That is, she reveals, artists don't appear to be doing what they think they should be doing because it's popular; they are sticking with what they want to do. However, Weller-Renfrow does notice a couple of trends which are exemplified in *Cream*: more video and time-based art and works characterized by meticulous detail.

Speaking to the diversity, media in the show ranged from video to weaving to painting, pen-and-ink drawing, oil-on-canvas painting and more. With so many different types of work presented—there were thirty-eight works in all, a few of them large—in the not-huge space of the gallery, the show was, as Weller-Renfrow aptly describes, "alive." Though there were some misses among the hits, the overall presentation showed vibrant promise within Bay Area art schools.

First among notable mentions was the work of Taravat Talepasand (SFAI) who had five works in the show: three pencil-on-paper works and two egg tempera and gold leaf on panel. Taking on a Frida Kahlo-beautiful-strangeness, these delicately awkward figurative works reveal what appears to be personal (though not realistically depicted, all of the figures describe the same person, suggesting self-representations) and the powerful. The figures reflect the artist's technical understanding of form and composition and their compromised or laboring positions are emotionally compelling.

Other standouts are the three works of Jeremy Chase Sanders (CCA), together dubbed *Fabricating Masculinity: Queer Plaids*. At first appearing to be only displays of plaid fabric à la Burberry, closer investigation finds that not only does Chase hand dye the threads, he weaves the work, and more: the artist is affected by synesthesia and sees colors as letters. Implementing his vision, each color in the weave represents a letter and together spell out the name of the plaid. On show: Gay/Fag, Queen/Fairy, and Clone/Pansy. Such intricacy is so well executed.

Categorically, it was the meticulous and time-laden work that was the hallmark of this show. In addition to Sanders's work, there were the simple stacks of hundreds of pieces of paper in Amanda Schoppel's (UC Davis) *Piles*. Almost completely unseen by the viewer, each piece of paper featured a drawing. Visible was the end of a line of each drawing that was allowed to go over the edge of the paper. These edges were painstakingly aligned, forming a line down each stack of papers. The piece was comprised of many of these stacks, each about five inches high, set on shelves on the wall. It was subtle, and beautiful and complex.

Opposite *Piles* was Katie Lewis's (CCA) *Accumulated Numbness (12 months and counting)* which consisted of clumps of red-orbed hatpins stuck in the wall in groups that gathered tightly and then spread out,

like comets in the sky. The work showed an ability to utilize a simple and unconventional medium to elegant effect.

Notable as well, Keira Kotler's (SFAI) luminous light-jet print on aluminum works as well as Robbyn Leonard's (SFSU) playfully serious mixed-media-on-video piece, *Limerence*. The show did have a handful of not-so-stellar moments, most falling into the predictable "art school art" category: "neat" ideas hovering on shtick-y; "socially conscious" concepts that are too obvious thus banal, and too, promising talent still in need of additional years of honing. Yet, all together, *Cream* remains a highly valuable (dare I say, critical) element of the Bay Area art scene that offers a view of what's new and happening here, and showing what our arts future may hold.

—Chérie Louise Turner

Cream—from the top closed in August at Arts Benicia, Benicia. Other artists in the exhibition included Jesus Aguilar, Lisa K. Blatt, Elaine Buckholtz, Ana Teresa Fernandez, Theresa Ganz, Jesse Gottesman, Jonn Herschend, Diane Landry, Roger Ngim, Nadol Pak, Nanda Palmieri and Ryan Thayer.

Chérie Louise Turner is a freelance writer based in Tahoe City.

Clockwise from top: Theresa Ganz, *Pillar*, 2005-06, hand-cut C-prints, collage, 10' x 3'; Diane Landry, *Privileges*, flip book with automation, 35" x 22" x 56"; Nanda Palmieri, *Cupcakes*, oil on canvas over panel, 48" x 48"; Roger Ngim, *Love-Death*, single-channel video; Jeremy Chase Sanders, detail of *Fairy Hallstatt plaid*, hand dyed, woven cotton, 3" x 144", at Arts Benicia.

