

The Mundane Meets the Bizarre

Santa Clara / Cathy Curtis

Leave it to a trio of Bay Area women artists to tickle the spot where the mundane and the bizarre meet and come up with figurative work that makes sense — right this minute, and who cares about next year? Actually, Louise Stanley has been a local fixture for some time now as a self-described "junior high realist." The other members of the trio aptly assembled to reflect *New Images* at the de Saisset Museum are Valerie Patten and Donna Mossholder.

Stanley is the art world's answer to Dorothy Parker, Erma Bombeck and Erica Jong. In Stanley's hands, there's a potential tempest in every teapot. Our heroine, The Artist, who does not face the world without painted nails and lips, does battle with a "hostile piece of paper," while her cat exhibits signs of terminal fright. She is shown, in *Burying a Reject in the Dead of Night*, with high heel poised on the trowel and the kind of guilt-stricken face that normally belongs to people who have just polished off whole cheesecakes. She reappears, minus stretch pants and with ballistic breasts, in an update of *Leda and the Swan*, and seems to be enjoying herself hugely; the joke's on Zeus. *Homage to Calder* features a still life of cigarette butts in the foreground ashtray and an improbably Calder-rich household with an early wire tabletop piece as well as



Donna Mossholder, "The Wind," 1981, watercolor on paper, 22"x30", at de Saisset Museum, Santa Clara.

one of the mobiles in red and green. Women seated on the couch and a bored-looking man with a drink reek of bourgeois discontent and could hardly be further removed from the playful spirit of Calder's art. Alongside the humor — or rather, making it happen — is Stanley's meticulous watercolor technique and venturesome taste in color.

Patten's haunts are more surreal,

more Hollywood glitzy. In *Watching T.V. Number 1*, a crowd of men and lipsticked women fix glazed eyes on the tube. Patten's people tend to live with leopard-print wallpaper and pile rugs in nauseous color blends. Their accessories often possess more vibrancy and presence than they can summon up themselves. And people do innocuous yet peculiar things, as does the man in *181*

Tasso Upstairs, who is making boxes out of Reynolds Wrap in the kitchen. In *Volleyball Group Number 1*, the blond girl in hot-pink scuffles, glimpsed down the hall, summons up an entire way of life. Dense with hot acrylic color and dime-store patterns, Patten's paintings go beyond literal investigation into plastic living and create a dreamy kitsch, odder and brighter than the real thing.

Mossholder steps over the live into pure fantasy. Or rather, it is as if she tries to integrate a perfectly normal environment of devils and spooks into the pale secular world we know. Her deliberately two-dimensional figures carry a heavy burden of symbols and signs, however, because they are the embodiment of superstitions and occult beliefs. How do we make an image of *The Devil Beating His Wife — Sun Shining Through Rain* in the late twentieth century? Mossholder's way with such themes is curiously literal and humorless, despite her stylized technique. Is she trying to open up some crevice and shake out all the undigested visions we have of the mystical world, visions that get mixed up with stereotypes (Chinese, blacks) and prejudices? The trickle of little images like Cracker-jack prizes, which surround her larger-scale themes, would seem to illustrate this intent. But without a lifeline to some less peculiar plane of vision, we're hard put to make sense of it all. □