

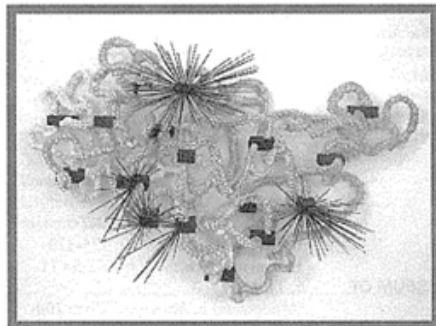
Northern California

'Ornamentation' at SJICA

The aesthetics of ornament and adornment have had an interesting history in modern art. Modernist purists derided ornamentation as bourgeois decadence or as philistine kitsch. Later, feminist and ethnic-based arts movements recuperated the arts of adornment as part of broader legacies of politically charged expressions of craft and labor. Pop and postmodernist artists used ornamentation as a way of engaging consumer culture, as well as expanding the vocabulary of media and contents for installation art, sculpture and other mixed-media practices. Today, ornament needs no such

rescuing, but its aesthetics still occasion numerous kinds of works and investigations. The San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art's recent exhibition showcased several Bay Area artists who, in one way or another, take on the aesthetics of ornamentation, via a variety of media.

Francesca Pastine's wonderful paint-objects combined a tactile engagement with paint and a sculptural approach to display that resulted in some of the strongest work in the show. Pastine paints canvases in thick, colorful oils, then cuts out segments and patterns, allowing them to hang down in patterns that upset conventional expectations of painting. Her *Doorknob Cozy* takes this further, by draping a large, patterned paint "skin" over a doorknob installed in a gallery wall, creating a useless adornment that carried



Robert Ortbal, *The Tendencies of Burnt Sugar*, 2005, foam, wire, wood, wax, paint, shellac, 51" x 68" x 27", at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art.

uncanny power.

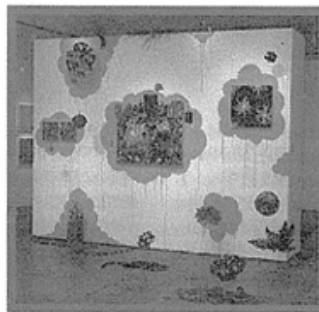
Carrie Lederer contributed an expansive multimedia installation, with paintings, sculpture and wall drawings, to evoke a wild abundance of overgrown and mutant natural forms. At its best, Lederer's work seems to grow out of (or into) the gallery space, an outcropping of greens and browns, of plastics and fake wood paneling, of nature and nurture. This particular example of her work was perhaps flawed by the occasional sloppy gesture, and its similarity to other artists working in similar terrains.

Robert Ortbal's bizarre artificial concoctions, on the other hand, are utterly original and evocative. Working with wax, wood, wire, foam and a variety of other household and industrial products, Ortbal's biomorphic sculptures careen out of walls and pedestals, or hang ominously from the ceiling, as if alive, still growing and teeming like some bizarre laboratory art/nature experiment gone awry. Teetering on the edge of ridiculousness, Ortbal has found a way of blending humor with the uncanny, where a surfeit of detail and an excess of adornment seem to spill over into something entirely else, a product of obsessive-compulsive craftsmanship or a mail-order kit for candied monsters. The invocation of natural forms and biological growths add a sense of recognizable terror to the work, in an age of bioengineering and technological experimentation.

Sarah Ratchye hung a number of toy guns covered in paint, jewels, beads and other plastic ephemera, creating an eerie use of decoration to question the beauty of violence. Given that she used plastic toy guns, however, the pieces lacked the kind of jolt of conflict that other materials might have fostered. Even more successful were Ratchye's paintings, wild dioramas of color, pop imagery and kooky figures, swirling in a pictorial landscape where a surplus of ornament can turn into something downright spooky.

Jamie Brunson also used layering techniques in her paintings, though more often towards decorative ends, where complex patterns and multiple media combine to make rich, organic spreads of color and texture. Bonnie Neumann's vast works, using oil and alkyd on panel, similarly explored layering processes to tease the line between structure and order. Her larger pieces were exceptionally well crafted, from surface subtleties to the broader compositions.

Some works in the show were less compelling, failing to take ornamentation beyond its more conventional "pretty wallpaper" aesthetic. Nathan Burazer's video projection creates quite nice animated figures, with moving shapes and



Carrie Lederer, *Barcelo*, 2005, acrylic and mixed media, at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art.

colors evoking ecosystems, but does not stand out among similar works by other artists, and verges on a trippy screensaver.

Timothy Horn makes deft use of materials such as glass and wax, to create oversized medallions and jewels;

however, here they don't quite push far enough to burst through campiness to something more provocative. On the whole, however, this was a well-rounded (and fun!) survey of local talent taking on ornamentation in interesting and thoughtful ways.

—David Buuck

Ornamentation: The Art of Desire closed in January at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art.

David Buuck is a contributing editor to *Artweek*.