

Stark Shadows

Linda and Bruce and Jess and Agnes

BY DOUG HARVEY

What is the point of making art? I worked at a Montessori daycare one summer, and there was this one kid who — when other entertainments weren't forthcoming — would endlessly recite a schizophrenic Zen vaudeville routine of his own precocious concoction, to wit: "Why did the chicken cross the road? I don't know Ha ha ha ha ha ha! Why did the chicken cross the road? I don't know Ha ha ha ha..." The Art World has yet to arrive at this level of sublime denial, but it's mostly due to the enormous quantity of multiple personalities duking it out — or more often avoiding the issue. In a fashion culture driven by planned obsolescence and amnesia, there's no place for consensus — except maybe the one that suggests nobody push the question too far, at the risk of queering a good thing for everybody. It's sort of a microcosm thing.

In the meantime, many thousands of individual artists are pursuing their independent research — probing for the elusive point in the privacy of their studios every day. Linda Stark is one L.A. artist who has been pursuing a deep engagement with the substance and function of paint for nearly two decades. Stark was part of a wave of Angeleno abstractionists — also including Sally Elsby and Linda Besemer — who came to prominence by taking the regional '90s craving for retro eye



Linda Stark, *Leprechaun's Gold Formula* (2007)

candy and infusing it with a smarter (but no less sumptuous) postminimalist engagement with the materiality of paint.

But where Besemer and Elsby quickly settled on signature strategies — canvas-free, towel-rack-draped, solid-paint stripey acrylic rectangles and gnarly wire grids encrusted in Elmer's glue and monochrome oil paint, respectively — Stark has restlessly pursued a shifting set of overlapping oeuvres, encompassing everything from pure geometric abstraction to Pop-inflected wildlife painting. For her 2006 show at Angles Gallery, she included three discrete bodies of work in her intricate and laboriously cumulative three-dimensional oil-painting style, including curtains of bug-clogged "amber," a series of pyramidal landscapes, and a roomful of iconic "Oracle" paintings ranging from depictions of the artist's mother to the back of the head of a cobra.

With "Potion Paintings and Drawings" — on view at Angles through January 5 — Stark presents a more tightly focused group of paintings that shift her investigations of the medium and its discontents one universe to the right. The show is made

up of eight works — each consisting of a 9-by-9-inch, incrementally built-up mandala of poured translucent ribbons studded with a variety of herbs, minerals, insects and assorted symbolic devices, plus a detailed drawing identifying these components. With this single and seemingly slight variation in emphasis, Stark has exposed and reclaimed the ritual and alchemical underpinnings of Modernist paint fetishism, producing a body of work whose *raison d'être* is as much magical as it is aesthetic.

In *Leprechaun's Gold Formula*, for example, the central axial mound of accumulated green paint shelters two kinds of crystal, the gemstones emerald and peridot, a gold (-plated) nugget and a four-leaf clover — as well as a variety of botanical elements selected for their prosperity-sympathetic frequencies. In the interests of Art History, I would personally be willing to assess the efficacy of the work in a lengthy double-blind trial involving many hundred lottery tickets and a case of Jameson's. But efficacy isn't really the point. Transformation is.

Certainly the measurable transubstantiation of AbEx fecal smears into real gold of the \$100-million-plus variety has inspired much of the contemporary Art World's core philosophical values. But beyond that, the fundamental belief that artists' manipulations somehow infuse their materials with meaning is essentially magical, and the history of art — and

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painting in particular — is rife with specific alchemical resonances, ranging from what were undoubtedly the closely guarded pigment formulae of shamanic cave painters to Joseph Beuys' romance with lard and honey; Sigmar Polke's gold, arsenic and meteor dust concoctions; or even Fred Tomasselli's transcendently literal psychedelic collages.

Due to the higher level of spiritual evolution found here, the West has long been a hotbed for work that embraces this hermetic legacy — particularly in the strain of Theosophy-tinged abstract painting typified by the work of Agnes Pelton and in the rags-into-riches eclecticism of Beat-ific assemblage artists like Wallace Berman, George Herms and Bruce Conner. Conner's current show at Michael Kohn Gallery features a small sampling of his late-'70s documentary photos from S.F. punk mecca Mabuhay Gardens and a handful of subsequent (1997) reconfigurations that attempt to translate the often nostalgia-laden language of classic assemblage into the more stripped-down graphic aggression of punk. It's hard to say how successful this experiment was without a more comprehensive exhibit drawing from this little-known era of Conner's oeuvre, but at the very least it makes a convincing case for a philosophical and formal continuity underlying the superficially antagonistic subcultures of the late 20th century — based on chopping up and rearranging the symbolic order of authoritarian mainstream reality.