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From the Los Angeles Times

AROUND THE GALLERIES

Piecing clues together with Victor Man

Also reviewed: Eli Langer, Erik Bluhm and Diane Landry.

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Most of the works in Romanian artist **Victor Man's** haunting U.S. debut are small, dark and virtually illegible from any significant distance -- they require an intimate degree of engagement. Moving through the show is a little like stepping up to an assortment of keyholes and peering into dark rooms where something sordid may or may not have occurred. It's not always clear what you're looking at, what it means or whether it's something you really want to be seeing, but each glimpse is engrossing.

The show's spare and somewhat delicate installation involves paintings, wall drawings, photographs (most printed on clear acetate and pinned directly to the wall), a large sheet of painted black glass and a handful of sculptural elements -- everything cast in tones of black, white, gray or silver. The imagery, drawn from a variety of unnamed sources, is obscure but suggestive, often ominous: the silhouette of a woman in historical dress, holding what looks like a rat in a cage (this is one of the wall drawings); a pair of women's legs; smoke curling from the end of a cigarette.

Individual images acquire a narrative, almost cinematic connotation from their proximity to one another, like pieces of evidence gathered in the investigation of a crime. One grouping, for instance, combines a fashion shot of a mostly nude Jessica Alba; a photograph of three jocular young men lounging on a pile of logs; another of three shadows falling across a grave; a painting of something white -- perhaps a garment -- that looks to have been lost or abandoned; and a commercially manufactured black flag emblazoned with a skull and crossbones.

The relationship between these disparate objects is loose and impressionistic -- suggesting less a particular story than a set of narrative tendencies revolving around themes of the body, sexuality, violence, fear and desire.

Animals figure in several works, emphasizing the primal nature of these themes. The second of the two wall drawings, for instance, depicts a tangled mound of limbs and fur: wolves, it turns out, devouring the body of a creature who is half-woman, half-horse. The image is fierce and intensely erotic but rendered in very faint charcoal outlines, so that it seems to hover on the wall like an apparition, nearly invisible from across the room.

A smaller canvas on an adjacent wall -- technically part of the same piece -- depicts another pack of wolves gathered in the midground of a barren landscape. Composed in loose, thick strokes and a rich though narrow spectrum of grays, it is one of the most riveting works in the show: a brusque, physical embodiment of its subject, as dense and substantial as the drawing is graphic and ghostly.

Man has a marvelous way with paint: simultaneously focused and agile, quick and sensual, reminiscent of Luc Tuymans, only moodier.

The fact that these paintings make up only about half the show's dozen or so objects would seem a waste of talent -- it could easily have included three times as many -- but for the consummate cleverness with which Man interweaves the other media.

Take the complex play of contrasts. The paintings are voluptuous and corporeal; the photographs cool, mechanical and voyeuristic. At the same time, many of the paintings were

clearly taken from photographs, and many of the photographs, having been printed on acetate, have a thicker, inkier quality than they would on regular paper. The impersonal tone of the commercial imagery -- of Alba, for instance, or the many fashion models painted onto the black glass -- contrasts with the spontaneity and anonymity of the snapshots. And the glass itself muddles all of these aspects, being photographic and painterly, reflective and opaque, massive and subtle at the same time -- a bold monumental object cloaked in receding imagery.

Between these mediums, Man plays with multiple ways of burying or obscuring the image: in pigment (the paintings), in reflection (the glass), in shadow (some of the photographs) or in whiteness (the wall paintings). One canvas is literally half-draped with black cloth -- which is particularly clever given that the portion of the image that remains depicts a women's knees similarly draped in a black skirt.

In no case does this interplay feel forced or gratuitous, nor does the subject matter seem gothic or sensationalistic. The tone, rather, is quiet, conscientious and meditative, which is ultimately what gives this relatively small and delicate show such presence in the gallery's cavernous space.

Blum & Poe, 2754 S. La Cienega Blvd., Los Angeles, (310) 836-2062, through Feb. 23. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.blumandpoe.com

Langer wavers in watery reflection

Eli Langer sets himself a difficult task in "Petit Mal," his third solo show at Daniel Hug, pairing several of his abstract paintings with a video piece that showcases one of Mother Nature's more dazzling tricks. The comparison is not entirely advantageous.

The video, called "Bender," is brilliantly simple: just a single, continuous, relatively tight shot of moonlight playing across the surface of water. Projected at a modest scale on one wall of the darkened gallery, the image registers not as a landscape, or even a body of water, but as an abstract drawing -- a particularly antsy Brice Marden, say -- set in motion. Lively white squiggles, slender as pencil marks, dance in an infinite variety of configurations across a seemingly flat black ground. As is usually the case when one really looks at water -- crashing onto a beach, curling between rocks in a creek, tumbling from the mouth of a fountain -- the movement is mesmerizing.

The paintings, by contrast, are conspicuously limited in their range of effects. Each consists of several slender black bars positioned at various angles on a white or gray ground, most smudged or obscured in places by additional strokes of gray. The compositions are clean and handsome. They toy with aspects of optical perception -- contrasting geometry and gesture, line and blur, figure and ground -- but in a way that feels neither unusually accomplished nor especially ambitious.

One can't help but think of Peter Alexander and David Hockney, two artists who've spent much of their careers enthralled with the surface of water, and of the sheer joy this meditation seems to bring to their work. Langer's aesthetic is obviously very different, but a little more of that joy -- plentiful enough in the video -- would be a welcome addition.

Daniel Hug, 510 Bernard St., Los Angeles, (323) 221-0016, through Feb. 16. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.danielhug.com

Bluhm's search for symbols

Erik Bluhm draws the material for his meticulous and very appealing collages at David Patton Los Angeles from vintage books, magazines and album covers, but he avoids the pitfalls of pastiche and nostalgia by eradicating most identifiable images. Photographic elements slip in here and there: a circle of hippies, arm in arm; a couple on a beach; a sunset.

Most of what Bluhm retains, however, are fragments of color, which he fashions into bold icons of ambiguous symbology. He's approaching the past, that is, less as a collection of signifiers than as a source of raw pigment -- which nonetheless conveys a distinct historical resonance.

The icons are characterized by clean, archetypal forms of the sort you might see on a banner or flag: spheres, triangles, mountains, birds and so on. It's a formal vocabulary with which Bluhm,

who has a master's in Western history, is impressively adept. His interest lies in utopian movements, intentional communities and other socio-spiritual endeavors -- a theme encapsulated in the show's vaguely ominous title, "Cooperate With the Energy and Anything That Happens," as well as by that of the performance group to which he belongs, the West Coast New Energy Encounter Group (which performed at the gallery last week). Any of these works would be more than suitable for launching one of those endeavors.

The real pleasure of the collages, however, lies in their inspired craftsmanship, which extends to a pair of strange, beautiful, planter-like sculptures, made from white paper and cardboard, that hang in the windows.

David Patton Los Angeles, 5006 1/2 York Blvd., Los Angeles, (323) 478-1966, through Feb. 9. Closed Sundays through Wednesdays. www.davidpattonlosangeles.com

Meditation led by a peaceful Landry

The recent rains were a fitting accompaniment to Quebec artist **Diane Landry's** "École d'aviation" (Flying School) at Solway Jones, a charming installation devoted to what you might call the inner life of the umbrella.

The installation consists of two dozen multicolored umbrellas mounted at different heights on small mechanized stands. Engines raise each umbrella up and down, opening and closing it at varying intervals, while simultaneously pumping a handmade bellows that's been fitted with a harmonica reed to produce a droning two-note sound. Spotlights mounted to the base of each stand project shifting, snowflake-like shadows on a scrim overhead as the canopies flare and retract.

The movement -- slow, rhythmic and wonderfully soothing -- is synchronized into a 30-minute loop that culminates in a joyful crescendo of luminescence. The impression is that of a living organism, characterized by interweaving cycles of breath that gradually come to encompass a viewer's own breathing and induce a meditative participation.

Solway Jones, 5377 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, (323) 937-7354, through Feb. 16. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.solwayjonesgallery.com

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