

ART REVIEWS : Grouping of Lauras Shows Arbitrary but Witty Choices

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The first thing to ponder in "The Laura Show" is its premise--an exhibition of work by six emerging artists, all of whom are named "Laura."

Coy? Trivializing? Arbitrary? Perhaps. But probably no more so than the gallerist's penchant for grouping artists under any number of impressively strained "themes"--"French sculptors under 25 working with synthetic fibers"; "Mid-career photo-documentarians based outside New York City"; "Second-generation conceptualists exploring bio-ethics"; and so on.

What's different about "The Laura Show" at the TRI Gallery is that it is, in fact, far less coy than the average group show, openly acknowledging the arbitrary nature of the curatorial process. What "The Laura Show" proclaims is that it is not the imperatives of value that determine who will be recognized and who will remain obscure; it is, more often than not, the vagaries of fate--being named "Laura," for example, rather than the equally mellifluous "Lauren."

The Lauras share a conceptual bent and a practiced wit. Laura Whipple sets up a metaphorical hall of mirrors in which a single vision of "gracious" living reverberates across increasingly abstracted levels of reality--Martha Stewart meets M. C. Escher. Here, a framed watercolor of a luxuriant garden, complete with inviting tables and shady paths, is laid on top of a white, wrought-iron stand that mimics the style of the chairs depicted in the image. Placed on the flat surface of the image are doll-sized pieces of similar wrought-iron furniture, the whole arranged so as to assert the mind-boggling elasticity of certain hard-sell fantasies.

Laura London displays six black-and-white photomurals of women wearing different half-slips, each image cropped between the ribs and the knees. The "Synthetic Slip Series" mocks the high drama of serially based Minimal art while exposing the low comedy that plays around women and clothes. If these mass-produced undergarments reflect the range of feminine "selves," that range--London wryly asserts--is obviously and impossibly restrictive.

Laura Cooper likewise uses clothing as an index of feminine identity; her work, however, is far less flippant. In "Tether," a billowing, white cotton nightgown floats up to the ceiling, fastened--with nine pieces of red thread--to nine lead weights arranged on the floor. Where the thread is sewn to the gown, tiny spots of dried blood have materialized; that blood suggests the contrast between the fantasy of flight and the recalcitrant materiality of the female body.

Laura Stein's startling "Four Eyes"--two antelope "busts" mounted on the wall--depicts a pair of reluctant trophies. Constructed of Styrofoam overlaid with strips of clear wax that resemble layers of bandages, these antlerless animals are vulnerable. Yet they resist their subjugation; they are still, but eerily animated--necks craned, brown eyes flashing.

The sense of loss implicit in "Four Eyes" becomes explicit in "Home/Suite," an installation by Laura Parker. A framed photograph of a Simplicity pattern for toddlers is juxtaposed with a table upon which faces are drawn in sand, and under which is placed a vase filled with dead flowers. Here, sentimental excess and romantic longing are pushed to the nth degree; the only difficulty is determining to what extent Parker buys into their seductions, and to what extent she remains critical.

Though it stands somewhat apart from the rest of the work in this exhibition, Laura Howe's installation is emblematic. Like the pieces she recently showed at Burnett Miller Gallery, "October 24, 1991--August 29, 1992" maps out the parameters of a woman's history, while struggling to define the artist's own position within such a tentative structure.

Three immense blueprint enlargements--a portrait of a German revolutionary, Olga Benario Prestes, who was captured and killed during World War II; an image of Olga riding in the cavalry regiment of the Red Army; and a photograph of two female miners at the end of the Victorian period--are surrounded by 24 sheets of ditto paper, each bearing a traced image of Howe's own hand.

Here, we are brought tantalizing close to Howe; we feel we know her through her art. But as with the title of the show--which betokens intimacy, putting us on a first-name basis with artists we have never met--that intimacy is a ruse. The only "Laura Howe" we really know is a prop designed to shore up a historical edifice still under construction.

A film still from Otto Preminger's 1944 "Laura" hangs in the entry hall of the gallery. It's more than a one-shot joke. In the classic film noir, a detective falls in love with a portrait of the (supposedly dead) heroine, only to have her walk through the door, shattering his illusions. So "The Laura Show," and Howe's work in particular, undermines those fantasies--of knowledge, intimacy and truth--promised but seldom granted by the work of art.

* TRI Gallery, 1140 S. Hayworth, (213) 936-8255, closed Tuesday-Thursday. Through Sept. 21.