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Embracing and refining Las Vegas gaudy

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT NOV. 20, 2007 | 12 AM TIMES STAFF WRITER

LAS VEGAS — If it did nothing else, “Las Vegas Diaspora: The Emergence of Contemporary Art From the Neon Homeland” could claim the best title of any art museum exhibition this year. The show chronicles the scattering of 26 artists who graduated from the gambling capital’s University of Nevada campus after studying in the 1990s with prominent art critic Dave Hickey.

Now, 15 of those artists work in eight other regions, especially on the coasts. The remainder decided to stay in town, where the show is on view at the Las Vegas Art Museum through Dec. 30. They represent the vibrant kernel of a serious art scene in a city few would expect to have one.

That’s the other reason that “Diaspora” is not just a snappy name but also an apt term for this undertaking. As nomenclature, the word is usually applied to describe the fate of minorities reviled by the dominant culture. That means it fits Las Vegas art to a T.

This metropolis is a distinctly American city, where modern art ideas originally forged in a European crucible often have the fit of a delicate glass slipper jammed onto the ungainly foot of an ugly stepsister. In that regard, Las Vegas is the new Los Angeles.

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Not so long ago L.A. was the place where culture was said to be mostly found in yogurt. Vegas, though, is still the kind of place where “Swan Lake” is assumed to be performed as a topless revue, save for the incongruous ostrich feathers.

“Las Vegas Diaspora” takes that no-class, low-art slur and wisely runs with it, turning most every imaginable sow’s ear into a startling silk purse. The aesthetic refinement is downright extreme.

Hickey, who was guest curator for the show (his wife, Libby Lumpkin, is the museum’s director), came to the forefront of American art criticism -- snagging a MacArthur prize in the process -- nearly 15 years ago, when he audaciously argued that, of all things, beauty would become the art-issue of the 1990s. It did.

The topic assumes an unexpected tone of militancy in “Las Vegas Diaspora.” Beauty isn’t offered as some timid escape from society’s crushing woes, but as a sharp rebuke: Not that; this!

I surrender -- happily.

The works

Thomas Burke’s 16-foot-long panel of undulating geometric color, “The Hots,” crosses Sol LeWitt with a Navajo blanket, then turns on the neon. Jane Callister’s “Cosmic Landslide” is a primordial ooze of sliding paint -- pigmented magma.

It might have been the site for the Rev. Ethan Acres’ “Miracle at La Brea,” a digital photograph that shows the born-again preacher happily resurrecting a winged Tyrannosaurus rex from the tar pits and sending it heavenward.

Shawn Hummel juxtaposes a panel enameled in cherry red automotive paint with big color photographs of a purple car hood and a late-night glimpse into an apartment building window, disturbingly illuminated by acrid yellow light. It’s like a gorgeous Ellsworth Kelly abstraction that morphs into a vaguely predatory image.

Nearby, lovingly described slabs of raw meat and entrails, gaily marbled with fat and painted in slick oils by Victoria Reynolds, seem right at home in their elaborate Rococo frames. No guts, no glory.

Sleek, glamorous, sexy, sensational -- this art is also intellectually savvy. The artists are fluent in the complex language of contemporary art, and the best of them speak distinctive dialects.

Bradley Corman’s black, anodized aluminum wall relief starts with a sober, Donald Judd-style Minimalism. But the striated horizontal surface of the wide, rectangular relief is slightly bowed, almost imperceptibly engaging ambient light. Static Minimalist form careens into a speeding visual blur.

Across the room, Gajin Fujita engineers a different yet related collision, pushing urban street graffiti into Japanese screen painting. With a tagger’s skill he writes an angry “BURN” across the flight pattern of an up-from-the-ashes phoenix.

Drawing you in

Seduction is also a prominent leitmotif, with the art regularly offering come-hither glances. Philip Argent does it in luscious yet apocalyptic paintings that merge crystalline shapes with liquid color, negative space with hard-edge undulations. His paintings record the big-bang-birth of a thousand worlds.

In a hall of mirrors, a woman in a shimmering dress is sheltered from the viewer, thus, she is not seen. In a way that is reminiscent of acrylics, some of the raven hair is painted over the face.

Some of the most striking works are by Josiah McElhenney, whose distinctive 2001 work “The State of the World” reads something like a personalized consumer database stretched wide, but the flourishes of paint echo Reed’s work too strongly. McElhenney’s hand-blown glass confections lurk in the background of Curtis Fairman’s otherwise cheeky sculptures, assembled from discount-store candlesticks, bowls and vases and suggestive of glittery, potentially lethal erotic toys. Almond Zigmund’s geometric decals on a gallery window-wall and Sherin Guirguis’ jazzy, decorative wall-relief of Eames-like stacking chairs both recall Isermann’s work.

Guirguis manages to transform the influence into something uniquely her own, though, largely through an unexpected manipulation of materials. What looks like a raised, linear drawing is in fact painted Masonite. Sculpture, painting, drawing, relief and furniture tumble together into one marvelously polymorphic species.

Odd yet effective

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Among the show’s strangest, most unexpected works are two large, oil-on-linen “Crack” paintings by Jason Tomme. Ethereal golden-brown panels turn the show’s volume way down, their shadowy hues recalling fragments of ancient wall behind the foreground action in a Caravaggio, like “The Calling of St. Matthew” or “Boy With a Basket of Fruit.”

Art’s action lies in the breach, escaping through unexpected fissures, this canny work suggests, lurking in the illuminated void where flamboyant human dramas unfold.

A large majority of the artists are painters, but many of them make paintings with sculptural qualities. Among the most adept is David Ryan, whose organic reliefs layer flat, irregularly shaped puddles of vibrant color that miraculously carve out deep volumes of visual space. Wayne Littlejohn heads in the other direction, his organic tower of sculpted polystyrene spray-painted in lascivious hues, like the passionate Venus flytrap in “Little Shop of Horrors.”

Two other features of “Las Vegas Diaspora” are noteworthy. Both represent something you’re unlikely to encounter in any other or European art museum east of the Mojave Desert. (The show travels to the Laguna Art Museum in March.)

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James Gobel’s knockout “painting” of Regency fops suggestively dining on tasty cherry pie, all made from cut-and-glued felt and yarn, hangs on a big entry wall painted bright tangerine. Tim Bavington’s equally fine, similarly monumental stripe-painting, “Step (In) Out,” hangs on a lime green wall.

Two other art-adorned walls are suavely painted lemon yellow and aubergine. Think about all that Little Richard tutti-fruittiness the next time you’re nodding off inside some tired white cube at MOCA, the Hammer, the Whitney or the Walker. “Serious” contemporary art museums wouldn’t dream of it.

More’s the pity -- especially as the other novel twist comes in the show’s catalog, right after Hickey’s typically engaging essay on what makes a worthy art program meaningful. Five pages of raucous party pictures are sturdy of Vanity Fair -- and not just the slick celebrity magazine, but the Thackeray story satirizing 19th century British tastelessness and greed.

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Christopher Knight Los Angeles Times art critic Christopher Knight won the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for criticism (he was a finalist for the prize in 1991, 2001 and 2007). In 2007, he also received the Lifetime Achievement Award in Art Journalism from the Rabkin Foundation.

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