

Christopher Knight, "Exhibit houses modern relics," Los Angeles Times, 30 November 2007, p. E30, illus.

Exhibit houses modern relics

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When Jeffrey Vallance builds a container to house a relic, such as a lump of coral painted with the likeness of former television news anchor Connie Chung or rhinestone-studded brooches secured from Las Vegas souvenir shops, three things are certain: The shard has autobiographical meaning for the artist; the reliquary's formal style resonates with the relic; and the eccentric enterprise makes very strange yet perfect sense.

Take the rhinestone pins, which are among 18 new reliquaries in Vallance's gratifying exhibition at the Margo Leavin Gallery. Collected when the Los Angeles artist lived for a few years in Las Vegas in the mid-1990s, they include the expected celebrities — Liberace, Elvis — as well as two unexpected ones, Nixon and Jesus. These juxtapositions fuel a grin.

But the pins, fabricated in sparkly rhinestones set against a black velvet background, also form a social constellation that represents a celestial projection of human needs and desires. Vallance has installed them in a black-lacquered Neoclassical receptacle with an ornamented broken pediment, plainly referring to Caesars Palace. These are "The Gods of Vegas."

The pins recall the maps, small objects and art reproductions inside a Joseph Cornell box, and a similarly condensed universe of dreamlike whimsy unfolds. The tone is different, but the urge to construct a poetic narrative is the same.

It's disconcerting to start drawing connections between, say, Jesus and the resurrection of Elvis' faltering performance career in the showroom at the International (now Hilton) Ho-

JEFFREY VALLANCE: "The Gods of Vegas," pins made of sparkling rhinestones set against a black-velvet background, form a social constellation in a black-lacquered Neoclassical receptacle.

tel. From there, it's but a short, if decidedly bizarre, step to Nixon, whose election and swearing-in as president also represented a comeback — one that roughly coincided with Elvis' in 1968 and 1969.

Vallance "signed" the reliquary with his own rhinestone-

encrusted name pin, fully democratizing the display. The hierarchy of saints and sinners collapses with a Liberace flourish.

Another box, titled "Holy of Holies: Lutheran Relics," is filled with medallions, pins and other religious emblems gathered during the artist's San Fernando



Margo Leavin Gallery

Valley childhood. The marvelous dissonance between a reliquary, meant to hold a saint's fragments, and Lutheranism, born of Protestant dissent, is inescapable. So it seems entirely sensible that Vallance's little sanctuary (its title comes from the Hebrew Bible) is designed in the elaborate shape of a Buddhist shrine. Another curveball is gaily thrown into established concepts of personal piety.

Vallance's reliquaries are being shown with a Conceptual work, "Drawings and Statements by U.S. Senators," which the artist initiated as an undergraduate 30 years ago this month. (The framed works on paper constituted his first solo exhibition, held in 1978.) Thirty-four senators responded to Vallance's letter of inquiry, which asked for their thoughts on art and, if possible, a drawing.

Judging from the replies, many if not most of the solons seem to have assumed the letter was from a kid in elementary school. They cheerfully talk down to the college art student about their own lack of artistic interest or aesthetic skill.

"I am not an artist," Adlai E.

Stevenson III demurred. "I dare not hazard a drawing."

Barry Goldwater sent a contour rendering of a cactus beneath a blazing sun, and William Proxmire drew a curvilinear abstraction in felt-tip pen. Hubert Humphrey enclosed a photocopy of a speech he delivered on the 10th anniversary of the National Endowment for the Arts.

The responses run the gamut — funny, touching, peculiar, maddening, sometimes even informed. What connects this precocious early work to Vallance's latest reliquaries is their shared cheerfully revealing collision between the intensely private and the resolutely public, the personal and the institutional. It's a place we all inhabit.

Margo Leavin Gallery, 812 N. Robertson Blvd., West Hollywood, (310) 273-0603, through Dec. 19. The gallery is closed Sundays and Mondays. www.artnet.com/gallery/174240/margo-leavin-gallery.html