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Collective fantasies take flight

By DAVID PAGEL
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An untitled group show organized by painter **Kristin Calabrese** gives viewers plenty of insights into her sensibility without giving anything away. You have to do a fair share of work to figure out what links the paintings, sculptures and one outdoor installation by the 13 artists, but that's part of the pleasure of this free-form show at the Honor Fraser Gallery.

At a time when multi-artist exhibitions regularly divide into two groups — tediously meaningful theme shows that use art to illustrate big ideas and laissez-faire mishmashes in which meaning takes a back seat to test-the-market salesmanship — Calabrese's show stands out because it makes a place for confusion.

Rather than treating doubt and uncertainty as problems to be eliminated, her nameless show emphasizes the physical nature of visual experience. It invites the imagination into action and demonstrates that intuition is as powerful a force as the logic of rational argument.

Conventional wisdom holds that if artists want to be taken seriously as curators, they leave their own works out of the show. That's the first rule Calabrese breaks. The show starts with "In Between the Cracks," Calabrese's approximately 3-by-4½-foot painting of a blue sky seen through cracked glass, perhaps a windshield or a picture window. Along some of the spider-webbed fissures Calabrese has painted crocheted strands of red yarn.

Intellectually, the beautifully rendered image doesn't make much sense. Why would someone crochet a pattern that echoes the cracks in safety glass? To repair the damage? Suggest bloodshed? Soften the blow? Create a silent echo?

And what holds gravity at bay, keeping the yarn from slid-



MÉLANGE: Brenna Youngblood's spray-painted collage is a sensual stew of imagery, down-to-earth and otherworldly.

ing down the transparent glass? Contemplating an answer to that question is disturbing: The yarn rests on the glass because both lie horizontally, which may well mean that you are lying on your back, like Sleeping Beauty, looking up toward the heavens through a glass-covered coffin.

The physical tension between expansive summer sky and a sense of deadly confinement creates the odd poetry that gives Calabrese's piece its edge. Her picture calls to mind works by Peter Alexander, Joe Goode, Vija Celmins and Louise Bourgeois, all of which bring mystery within arm's reach without diminishing its power. None of the other works in the show looks like Calabrese's. But like hers, the best ones create complex spaces that pull your eyes and mind off the beaten path.

Brenna Youngblood's spray-painted collage of color photographs looks like a 3-D assemblage by Robert Rauschenberg that has been run over by a bus. Its deliciously sensual stew of imagery, including an illuminated light bulb and several small fans, is both down-to-earth and otherworldly.

Katie Grinnan's "Nitrogen Narcosis" is a spindly totem made of bamboo, laminated particle board and resin-soaked swaths of canvas that she has cut and folded to resemble the fronds of fan palms. The 8-foot-tall sculpture, complete with photo-collage backdrop, has the presence of a miniature windmill or a set of oversize, homemade Tinker Toys. Its post-apocalyptic menace is tempered by its nutty joyousness.

Nikko Mueller's acrylic-on-canvas ricochets between abstraction and representation, sometimes taking the shape of a benign decoration and at others seeming to be a creepy picture of suburban sprawl. Theme parks, industrial warehouses and tidy backyards conspire to create an Orwellian atmosphere of poisonous beauty.

Mary Hellmann's two-tone painting and **Glenn Goldberg's** 7-foot-tall picture of a 7-foot-tall flower look simple: flat, diagrammatic, even dumb. But each manages to pack loads of intrigue into its crude marks, suggesting the presence of worlds within worlds that leave viewers ample room to maneuver.

Nina Bovasso, Heather Brown and Mark Grotjahn likewise strive to make works that have their feet firmly planted in more than one world. But their paintings feel forced. They lack the delicate touch that lets the magic happen as if by accident.

Rebecca Morris, JP Munro and Matt Chambers are even less successful, their works too aggressively focused and visually unified to be more than illustrations of ideas — some good, some bad, but all of them too self-consciously controlled to leave room for serendipity.

Susie Rosmarin's precisely painted geometric abstraction shares so little with everything else in the show that you can't help but think that Calabrese included it as a sort of monkey wrench — as something thrown into the mix to ensure that it doesn't come off as formulaic. The show has a life of its own, an unpredictable give and take that compels viewers to see the world with fresh eyes.

Honor Fraser Gallery, 1337 Abbot Kinney Blvd., Venice, (310) 401-0191, through Sept. 27. Closed Sundays, Mondays and Tuesdays. www.honorfraser.com