



'WINDSWEPT'

Courtesy photos



'A SONG FOR THE FIELDS'

Playing the Fields

Laura Krifka shows her evolving focus as a painter and sculptor who deals with the interactions of light and dark, realism and fantasy

BY JOSEF WOODARD
NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

In what may be the closest thing to a signature, leitmotif piece in Laura Krifka's fascinating new exhibition at the Atkinson Gallery, her large painting "A Song for the Field" vividly draws us in even as it refuses to give us easy answers.

Two young people in a semi-nocturnal woodsy setting are seen gazing up in startlement at the crepuscular sky above. We don't know whether it is awe, collective epiphany or abject fear that serves as the powerfully motivating force that has seized them to the point of craning their extra-long, extra white necks — which, in a way, are the primary subjects and visual focus of the painting. What we don't know lures us in, and begs questions that may be left hanging in the artist's simultaneously vibrant and enigmatic way with a painting (and, occasionally, a sculpture).

If anything, the gist of Krifka's work, as seen in this show titled, with tongue way in cheek, "Milk and Honey," has to do with the intertwining and even symbiotic powers of light and dark. Krifka's easily identifiable aesthetic may be familiar to art-watchers in Santa Barbara. An MFA graduate of UCSB in 2010, Krifka left a memorable mark on those who caught

her strangely video/sculpture/painting fantasy alcove in the back of the UCSB Art Museum's MFA show a year and a half ago. Her work showed up again in a group show at Contemporary Arts Forum, stirring the pot and unsettling our senses, to expressive ends.

Seeing a cohesive one-person show, and in this almost absurdly idyllic gallery space at Santa Barbara City College, no less, brings us closer to understanding her intriguingly cryptic work, with its built-in challenges, teases and taunts. Starting the City College's admirable art exhibition season with a show this strong bodes well for things to come in the next academic season.

In Krifka's paintings, the faux innocent, fantastical and vaguely myth-basted scenes seem to tap into a range of influences, from pre-Modernist art-historical references to fairyland kitsch, with post-modernist twisting and twining of references and potential meaning all along the way. In one corner, we see hints of 18th-century French dandy Fragonard, in another, the fairydusted realm of nymphs, fairies and goblins.

Sexuality and allusions to sexual awakening (again, in tones of both light and dark) sneak into the pictorial vocabulary, often as not. On the sweet, epically romantic side, the largest painting in the

gallery is the cagily titled "Mine Eternal," in which young, sleeping, mythical lovers, nude and on a literal bed of pink roses in the woods, are being gently drawn into awakening by diagonal beams of morning sunlight, the alarm clock of the gods.

An adjacent painting, "Windswept," finds another pair of lovers aswirl in true love, as well as, apparently, an actual gale force wind. With these paintings, the clichés are piled on, to the point of suffocating nicety or sentimental gravitas through sheer excess.

But just across the gallery on the opposite wall, there hang two paintings whose less-innocent demeanor can't be ignored. "River Letch" is a meticulous painting of the small, mixed media tableau before it, called "Skinny Dip," in which a strangely caricatured man/creature from the black pond makes unwanted advances on a young woman. Beware the river leech! In "Seduction of a Young Squaw," a libidinal drama between four young figures down by the river, under a theatrically violet-suffused sky, piques our curiosity about the dynamics and possible misdeeds at hand.

Just in case we might get lulled by the lighter side and purely visual, visceral pleasures of taking in Krifka's art, nothing so nuanced or ambiguous is to be

ART REVIEW

LAURA KRIFKA, 'MILK AND HONEY'

When: through Sept. 23

Where: Atkinson Gallery, Santa Barbara City College, 721 Cliff Dr.

Hours: 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Friday and Saturday

Information: 965-0581, Ext. 3484,

www.gallery.sbccc.edu

found in the small — but big in impact — figurine sculpture "Fallen Women," a dead, nude woman in a pool of blood around her 18th-century-esque bonnet. References to the banality of violence, and sexual violence, creep around the undercurrents of Krifka's art, subtly inflected with feminist rage even as it carefully avoids overstatement or a ham-fisted approach to delivering a message. It's all in the margins and the luminous, campy, beautiful palette.

In the end, the dance of light and dark returns to the viewer's mind here. Throughout the show, with just the right amount of pieces to keep it full but not over-stuffed, the artist pits light against dark, elements of which inform, contradict and create a warming friction in the meeting.