

Euphrat Museum of Art

De Anza College, Cupertino, CA 95014

Art exhibition:

Picking Up the Pieces

October 1 – November 27, 2002

Museum Hours: Tu, W, Th, 10-4; Fri 10-2

Open first Saturday (11-2) and third Tuesday evening (6-8) of the month.

Open to tour groups by appointment.

Reception: Tuesday, October 29, 6-8 pm with artist presentation

Artists:

Magi Amma, Gregory Burns, Serene Flax, Leonard Gerstein, Ben Kashkooli, Keba Konte, Chere Lai Mah, Donna Keiko Ozawa, Remi Rubel

While *Picking Up the Pieces* refers to creating art from recycled scrap materials and caring for the environment, it also refers to picking up the pieces of one's life or picking up the pieces of a society after some devastation. The exhibition includes reference to rebuilding the body (because of age or trauma) and to our response to September 11 one year later.

Remi Rubel has worked with recycled materials for over a decade, being an early artist-in-residence at the NORCAL Sanitary Landfill Company in San Francisco (1991). Rubel's stunning wedding dress with 8-foot train is made of reused bottle caps, assorted recycled papers, metals, plastics, and fabric. Entitled *First Comes Love, Then Comes Marriage, Then...*, it is a dress with various phrases sewn into the expanding abdomen, all having to do with questions to women and men in a steady relationship. Are you going to have children? When are you going to have children? The statements are "found" statements, made to Rubel and others and collected by Rubel. Rubel ponders "how society communicates with partners about their future together. The abdomen is the focus; the public targets that area. People keep questioning you on where you're going with your relationship. The dress is pregnant with possibilities." Rubel reexamines cultural habits, biases, assumptions, and presumptions. She poses unusual ideas in her art, having once created a large installation for self-matrimony.

Donna Keiko Ozawa also works with recycled materials. Her artworks, which often have a hand-cranking component, are combinations of social relevance and imagination, some wonderfully quirky. *Impatience #1 – spinning* implies impatience with the artmaking process

and includes parts of ornate art frames and some exercise bar. If you crank this artwork too fast you are not effective and you chip into a piece of drywall. Then plaster dust falls and accumulates between the toes of an ornate lion's paw furniture leg. Ozawa uses familiar forms "to question cultural values, how we raise children and how we live on a daily basis. I have felt the suffocating power of silence and denial in a community continually recovering from forced relocation by the U.S. government during World War II." Through the illusion of physical interaction with the sculpture, she poses questions about collective responsibility. Several pieces are from Foosball parts and refer subtly to racism: *yellow man*, *blue man*, and *two white men*. Humor enters in a found book sculpture *What the Social Classes Owe Each Other*. Some are just plain fun, such as *puffy clouds with green ones encroaching* and the playful wood-wire-paper-glue *I am perfect for this job*, both crankable.

Chere Lai Mah presents an installation *Thinking of Home*. Her parents married in China in 1928 then came to the United States, first opening a shop in San Francisco, then a series of businesses in Fresno. "Last May I began peeling back the layers of cardboard boxes, 50-year-old candy, trunks and 75 years worth of invoices in our family store, to reveal the contents of rooms that had not been touched since the mid '40s." She displays some of these items, along with photos, clothing, and ceramic shards of recently imported vases she found in a dumpster. These form a basis for her recent art: a series of sculptures from the broken pots, and a show she created around Chinese women's clothing, called *Genealogy in Silk*. "Each generation sees clothes and objects of the past differently." Lai Mah has documented how women's fashions in China and the U.S. changed and correlated with events in China and with Westernization. She picks up pieces of family, cultural, and economic history, putting them together to make personal and societal meaning for today.

Keba Konte exhibits several large haunting works of photographic images on found wood, be it parts of furniture, shelves, or old flooring. A memory of human activities seems to be encapsulated in the wood. *Family Portrait: Cuba* shows an image of a young family riding on a bike. In *Soweto*, five old men sit on a bench. Paint and found objects are incorporated as needed, such as in *Lenny's Noise*, which includes saw blades, fabric pattern pieces, and a small photo of birds flocking around a set of telephone lines. It is part of a series inspired by the New Orleans Jazz Festival. His body of work is a composite portrait of "people's resiliency and resourcefulness, especially those in the Black Diaspora," as Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins wrote for his recent exhibition in San Francisco. But for each individual artwork, Konte wants viewers to react on a gut level. Old wood can give a feeling of the broken, run down, and dilapidated, but with Konte's images one feels the fullness of life lived. Konte finds beauty in a world with much despair. "I am not inventing any beauty that is not already in the world, I am merely documenting and holding a candle to it."

In 2001, various chapters of the Women's Caucus for Art in Northern California looked at the expansive issue of women and violence. Of these, two artists seemed particularly relevant to this exhibition: Serene Flax and Magi Amma.

Serene Flax, with an art career of over four decades, looked at violence, its aftermath, and our response to it in a series of works from the '70s. After reading about deceptions of the Atomic Energy Commission and pondering the devastation of the atomic bomb, she created

a surreal world in the series *Fallout*. For a work *What Havoc Man Has Wrought*, she once wrote, "He sprang from the earth and, in his conquest of nature, created the Inedible Mushroom — and with his hands shaped his own tombstone." But in Flax's art, life continues. The bones rise in *Jacob's Ladder*. The ladder symbolizes the ascent of all remains to the spiritual world of renewal, from where they fall back as the seeds of new life, much as forests replenish themselves after infernos. It is a ladder of hope to the Heavens, hope in the re-creation of life. Ashes rise, then fall to the sea, and coral grows. Flax has a larger, spiritual view of picking up the pieces in the world. Reflecting on devastation and fear, she rebuilds a universe, a "forever place." No wonder a subsequent series was called *Earth Renewal* and that now she creates cityscapes with headlights as moons and freeways as arteries, people seeking connections on the body of the earth.

Magi Amma exhibits several post 9/11 pieces created from recycled materials and referring to situations of women in a world often violent and oppressive. *Burka Blue* relates to the burka garment that women were forced to wear in Afghanistan, a symbol of their brutal repression. *Burka Blue* is constructed from an old milk carton. A clay woman inside (seen through a veil) is straining to look out a window. Part of a clock is above, part below. Amma says, "She's been there a long time and time is up." In *Strength*, a clay woman is in a drawer/ box contraption with a wheel on one side and several found objects that create a visual poetry. There is a ladder. She can escape. Amma's work is about inner and outer restraints. In an earlier work *Glass Ceiling*, a female figure sits on a chair, "pissed," one arm on her knee holding up her head. The arm sports some colored wires and feathers, indicating a wild, strong side to this woman. Amma speaks from experience. She was a computer-science engineer for many years and also has persevered as a single mother with two children.

Two artists have worked with picking up the pieces stemming from physical problems of the body and rebuilding bodies — Gregory Burns and Leonard Gerstein, one as patient, the other as healer.

"Water is my anchor," says **Gregory Burns**. "It is a great equalizer. I could build my body, my self-confidence. The world of water can be competitive or spiritual." Burns exhibits beautiful large semi-abstract paintings of swimmers. Watery, blurry blue worlds with fleshy body masses. Light caught on water. Arms outstretched. Sometimes like an angel. Titles such as *Build, Race, Last Lap*, and *Arrival*. Burns was a year old when he contracted polio, which left him paralyzed from the waist down and required him to ambulate with long leg braces and forearm crutches. At three he began swimming in the White House pool ("the only hot water pool around"). In the late '70s he moved to the Bay Area and entered the De Anza College Disabled Sports Program and began his competitive career which eventually led to the Paralympics in Barcelona, Atlanta, and Sydney, and earning four world records and half a dozen gold and silver medals. During this time he also traveled around the world and painted. He has other series, such as *Sacred Sites*. His paintings are widely collected. Burns has made an artwork of his life, as an accomplished painter, athlete, and motivational speaker for youth and Fortune 500 companies.

Leonard Gerstein exhibits *Total Knee Replacement*, carved into a leg of pepper tree wood, and including real total knee replacement components (they had been opened elsewhere and discarded), bones of butternut, and surgeon's hands of basswood. The knee's patella sits on the section he carved as an open flap of skin. Gerstein makes art from pieces of found wood — old stumps, fallen tree limbs. Earlier, as an orthopedic surgeon, his art was putting together the pieces of hips and knees that were worn or damaged. He recently retired and devotes more time to his art in wood. Regarding the surgeon's hands in the sculpture: "The emotional aspects of the carving is not just one of the total knee, but the joy the surgeon gets when the total knee replacement fits and moves perfectly." As he talks, he moves his hands in a manner to test the joint. Gerstein also makes practical walking sticks, carved from willow and topped with hip replacement parts, as well as an ongoing series of figurative work regarding Jewish culture.

Picking Up the Pieces is dedicated to artist **Ben Kashkooli** (1954 –2002). At 5:30 am on September 11, 2001 he saw an article about Agent Orange on the front page of the *San Francisco Chronicle* and felt good the word was getting out. Kashkooli had made three trips to Vietnam researching the chemical's devastating effect on people and land. He planned to make a documentary. Within hours the towers of the World Trade Center came down. In the next eight months Kashkooli returned twice to Vietnam and interviewed Le Cao Dai, M.D., who studied the effects of Agent Orange. Dr. Le Cao Dai died in April. Kashkooli died in June. On exhibition is his unedited interview tape, the 9/11 early edition about Agent Orange, an email, a poem.

Also on exhibit is earlier work. While Kashkooli incorporated found objects in much of his work, what are shown here are primarily artworks, such as silk-screened words on a child's chalkboard, which reflected his thoughts about world peace in recent years. In 2000, Kashkooli created his "school days" works. *Killing is no use (Dalai Lama)*. *Emma Goldman* ("I'd rather have roses on my table than diamonds on my neck"). *Poverty and Environmental Degradation are Interdependent*. Also *When you time travel you travel light*. These grew from his 1996 work *Let Live*; he "etched" these words on a 2" Etch-A-Sketch toy during a tumultuous time for him. Between 1996 and early 1999 Kashkooli was faced with severe adversity. The 1998 installation at De Anza College, *Shelter from the Storm*, made entirely with natural materials found on the campus, provided respite. Like much of his installation work, it existed once, was disassembled and dissipated, so photographs are the only reference. Kashkooli was emotionally and actively involved in environmental and peace issues, and was deeply disturbed by the conflict in the Middle East and recent events. His untimely death in Summer 2002 left his wife with the job of survivors: picking up the pieces, holding them, and building something new. She and those of us who worked with him pay homage in this exhibition to this caring and peaceful man.

The exhibition was curated by Jan Rindfleisch and Diana Argabrite with assistance from Katya Kashkooli, the Women's Caucus for Art, and the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, through their web site for *eMotion Pictures: An Exhibition of Orthopaedics in Art*.

####

Call Jan Rindfleisch 408-864-8836 for more information.