

ART

Scene

Body and Soul

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The ICA's 'Currents' is a juicy show full of images of sex and death

By NANCY STAPEN

REMEMBER "Currents," the controversial revolving-art exhibition program initiated by the Institute of Contemporary Art in 1982 and recently replaced by more standard exhibits?

Well, "Currents" is back.

Intended as a way to achieve fresh-off-the-studio-walls spontaneity and to mirror our age of artistic pluralism, "Currents" was intensely criticized for its lack of thematic coherence and the ICA's apparent forfeiture of its curatorial responsibility to explain contemporary art.

Responding somewhat to public pressure, "Currents" became, in effect, a code word for group shows by artists of interest to the ICA's curators, shows that ran for two months and whose instal-

FALLEN: Rona Pondick's 'Angel,' below, is one of the works featured in the 'Currents' exhibit.



lation became less random. Inevitably fewer artists were included in each show and strong relationships among the artists became apparent.

This pattern is in evidence in the newest version of "Currents" (on exhibit through April 23). In fact, six of the seven artists on view explore related themes. But to this viewer, "Currents" is still frustrating, because although those relationships clearly exist, there is again no explicit statement offered by the curators to clarify this vision for the viewer.

This "Currents" show is undeniably juicy. In fact, it is rank with sex and death. Attitudes toward the body — its carnality, animalistic functioning, eroticism, elegance, ability to feel pain, and its final demise — fill the works on view.

The body is also asserted as the vehicle of the self, and the self is seen as the single arbiter of experience. When the social world is evoked, it is mediated by autobiographical material and subjective perception.

Lastly, this is not an art-is-bankrupt-and-dead group, but a collection of artists who work in a modernist progression, sincerely referencing past art but mainly bouncing off of minimalism.

With two female artists (Aimee Rankin, Rona Pondick) and four males (Alan Turner, Ray Smith, Dexter Lazenby, and Juan Downey) engaging these themes, the show presents a striking gender dichotomy.

Both Rankin and Pondick dive head-on into the realm of female eroticism. There are no demure apologies here; their works amount to a defiant rejection of "good girl" stature.

Rankin's minimalist routes are evident in the polished geometric exter-

iors of her wall-mounted boxes. "I want them to be like (minimalist artist) Don Judds' with guts," she has said. And guts they have, each a peep show of Pandora's box crammed with the grotesque effluvia of gothic pornography — from skulls and mummies to bloody, slitted genitalia, all accompanied by suitably raunchy soundtracks.

Rankin reverses the traditional passive female role by adopting the hyper-male view of female sexuality — all bonded whores and gaping, deathlike wombs — and combatively casts that vision back on the viewers' voyeuristic gaze.

The Madonna/whore split is also evident in Pondick's sculpture, particularly "Angel." A masked lump of wax fecal forms — painted white and covered in gauze — rests on five white, stacked pillows, but this angel has fallen. Bits of brown wax sully the figure's breast- or womb-like form, the pillows

are coated with dirt, and the scatological references bring the idea of the body back to its most earthly associations. Despite (or perhaps because of) its bizarre tensions between purity and defilement, Pondick's work conveys a relaxed ambiance born of a holistic acceptance of the body's entirety.

Not so in Turner's paintings, which are characterized by fragmentation and implied threat. Here the body is transformed into a surreal web of dissembled flesh, pierced by eyes and Old Masterish hands that hover in threatening, knife-like or phallic gestures.

Like much of the works on view here, Turner's are pungent with visual puns — the seamless expanse of flesh implying seamy events to come. The female is here the prey or object of potentially sado-masochistic occurrences, the body itself reduced to truncated hearts.

A similar dismemberment occurs in Smith's oil-on-wood paintings. Born in Mexico and now living in New York, Smith adopts the scale — but subverts the heroics — of the great Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and Jose Orozco. Smith is even more influenced by the pain-filled, surreal self-portraits of Frida Kahlo.

Smith also implies that the body is a realm full of eroticism and mortality, a repository of unfulfilled longings. This is most explicit in "Amor y Muerte" ("Love and Death"), where an elongated nude female with a giant dissociated head remains out of reach of the artist, whose own severed head floats, accompanied by a death mask in an arc of water on the painting's upper right.

In contrast — despite its abstract, rough-hewn forms and oblique figurative references — Bostonian Dexter Lazenby's

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sculpture conveys a highly integrated vision of the material world. Drilled and carved from limestone, these totemic structures rise elegantly into space, suggesting the physical world as both substantial and spiritual.

Like Smith, Downey also translates socio/political events through the medium of the self, as in "About Cages," which chillingly juxtaposes three live canaries with a three-monitor slow-motion tape of canaries in flight. This is framed by two soundtracks; on the left a woman reads from Anne Frank's diary, on the right the confessions of a contemporary Chilean torturer are agonizingly intoned.

In addition to articulating the political via the personal, "Cages" alludes to male/female sexual hierarchies, here juxtaposing the oppressed female with the oppressing male. Downey suggests that both are trapped in the invisible cages of rigid sexual roles.

"Currents" also includes the mixed-media paintings of Peter Nadin, an artist who contrasts geometric and expressive, abstract and representational styles in a single work. Nadin's efforts are clearly aimed at developing a richer contemporary painting strategy.

Although intriguing, the art-about-art focus bears little relationship to the other artists' preoccupations, and its inexplicable inclusion in this show is one of several mysteries "Currents" leaves to viewers to decipher.