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KIM ABELES

by Orville O. Clarke

([Crossroads School of the Arts, Sam Francis Gallery](#), Santa Monica) Kim Abeles, who is one of the most acute observers of the state of our region's body and soul, will once again serve witness in Charting Los Angeles. This exhibition includes selections from various projects, including *the Smog Collectors*, *Run-off Dolphin Suitcase*, *Mountain Wedge*, *Public Sitings*, and *Legend for a Mapping*, as well as *Equidistant* which will be available both on a computer and as a printed version on fabric. The importance of this work cannot be understated, not only for its originality and power, but for the dramatic message it delivers about the health of our city.

One of the great mysteries of the Southern California art scene is why Abeles is not one of the most recognized artists of her generation. Flat out, she is simply one of the most talented people creating art today. I suppose we could just write it off to the old problem of sexism, making it more difficult for women to succeed--just ask the Gorilla Girls. But it is probably even deeper than that, involving not only her use of non-traditional materials in the creation of her artworks, but the political/social nature of her subject matter as well.

There are two characteristics that have always seemed to be part of her work: A unique blend of materials, and her sense of humor. I can clearly remember the first time I saw one of her installations; it took my breath away. Two pieces still stand out as vividly as if it were yesterday: *too raz e bil'dn iz too tar it down* (1983) and *A Problem with Maintenance* (1983). The first was a mixed-media altar dedicated to the destruction of the historic Buder Building in St. Louis that recalled the composition of Masaccio's famed Trinity. The title cleverly points out the callous treatment of historic structures in our society. The next work, which featured an ironing board cover as the Bayeux Tapestry, was a not-so-subtle commentary on the role of women, who by-the-way created that famous history of the Norman Conquest. She has not abandoned this pattern.



"Zoe's Highchair," particulate matter (smog) on plexi/ altered chair/oils on wood, 45 x 15 x 19", 1991.

Run-off Dolphin Suitcase is a perfect example. Here Abeles has collected her "art" such as motor oil containers from trash that pollutes our beaches. She blends the concept of a suitcase, for running away, with the image of a dolphin. We can run away from our problems, but the dolphins, who we "try" to protect from the tuna fishing industry, have no place to go. The plight of water off Santa Monica and other regional cities is packaged like a giant stuffed toy. With the didactic tone of her art and its political content, Abeles recalls the spirit of Neoclassic tradition.

Even more conscious-raising is her *Smog Collector* series. She really takes the gloves off when it comes to this most



"Equidistant," details above and below, mixed media, 1996. From central point, represented by an image of the La Brea Tar Pits, equidistant locations were photographed along a series of concentric circles. The two reproduced below represent those mapped in the image above.



pressing of environmental problems. Her art is created by the impact of acid air on silk or plexiglass. We look at these delicate and almost ephemeral images and are struck by their beauty, yet are confronted with the realization that these images are the result of deadly pollution that we, and even worse our children, breath on a daily basis.



"Public Sitings (All Space in Los Angeles County)," inkjet printing and acrylics on treated muslin/color-coded telephone wire and poker chips defining all types of public spaces, 12 x 12 x 6', 1998.

Whether the artist is measuring our treasured, or lost, buildings, mapping sister sites in the urban center, or testifying on the health of the Southland, she is a positive force for change. Abeles serves a constant reminder of the responsibility of every citizen to take an active part in the life of their city. She is not the type of artist who is isolated in a studio, creating work that relates only to an educated elite, but a craftsperson who speaks to everyone, especially children. This is not done at the expense of the quality of her art. It is still dynamic, forceful, and demonstrates a playful innovation in the materials used to construct her sculptures. She teases our senses, while reminding us of the dangers that constantly assault our paradise.

If you have never experienced the work of Kim Abeles, take this opportunity to fall in love. And bring the kids, they will appreciate her art as well. If you know her work, well I don't mind preaching to the choir, you'll eat up this show.

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