

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

ART REVIEW : CALIFORNIA AS SANDRA RUBIN SEES IT

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You know that Sandra Mendelsohn Rubin gets Los Angeles right when you roll up your car windows, tune out the day's annoyances and drive along a stretch of open freeway. The near-silent remove from office clamor, the vast open skies, faded colors and the band of cropped trees, fences, billboards, rooftops and street lights running between highway and heavens are major components of her city.

It's not the showy Los Angeles typified by Broadway shoppers, leather-skinned surfers, Westside yuppies, Hollywood starlets or any of the other stereotypical constituencies favored by East Coast writers. It's a still, sprawling, muted place whose invisible population is known by the mementos it leaves on a night stand or the lights in windows of anonymous apartments. Nothing flashy, nothing particularly sensuous appears in most of Rubin's work, and yet hers is one of the most accurate views of the city any artist has painted.

This view of the Southland, along with a few interiors, a warm portrait of her husband and a "Northern California Landscape," compose Rubin's current show at the County Museum of Art through June 9. It's part of the ongoing "Gallery 6" exhibition series of contemporary art, this time by one of the museum's Young Talent Award winners. She shows 17 meticulously painted oils from 1980 to 1985.

The first thing to get straight about Rubin's painting is that she is not a Photo-Realist. Though her realism emits the cool perfection of the genre, she always paints from life, often from a truck outfitted as a rolling studio. And though her subjects are factual condensations of the ordinary, she does not share the Photo-Realists' focus on Formica counters, chrome bumpers, tile floors and other reflective surfaces of a consumer society. Her choices typically include gangly eucalyptus trees, twisted

evergreens, delicate snarls of electrical wires and middle-class dwellings not quaint enough to be dubbed “dingbats.”

She renders them in a satiny smoothness. Night views from 1980 and 1981 are composed of slow gradations of darkness, twinkling trails of light along Santa Monica Bay and dramatic shafts of illumination pouring from windows or pressed into corners. Daylight pictures often catch the overcast days that disappoint Midwestern visitors in search of suntans.

In fact, light or lack of it is Rubin’s most prevalent subject. She scrupulously observes light channeled through louvered blinds in a studio, funneled from a lamp shade, casting soft shadows of furniture or playing out an atmospheric symphony in barely perceptible clouds over a slice of landscape.

There’s a sense of detachment in Rubin’s work that can make it seem emotionally vacant, yet this tone of distanced observation is also the crux of the art. It’s not surprising to learn that she is a long-distance runner as well as a driver of California highways. Her art has the quality of experience so thoroughly ingrained by repetition that it takes an artist to make us see it again.