

Collages that act like oil on canvas

Made from bits of painted metal, Tony Berlant's new works turn the world inside out.

By David Pagel Special to The Times. Around the Galleries, **Los Angeles Times**. Los Angeles, Calif.: May 7, 2004.

Tony Berlant's new works turn the world inside out. And that's just the beginning.

At the L.A. Louver Gallery, 14 medium-sized pieces look like collages but behave like paintings. Made from cut-up cookie tins and other bits of painted metal affixed to wood panels with thousands of the tiny nails cobblers use, each of Berlant's patiently wrought assemblages is as fluid and nuanced as any oil on canvas.

Although the veteran L.A. artist uses shears, hammers and planks of wood rather than paint, brush and canvas, the results are so supple and delicate that it's difficult not to think of his creations as gracefully painted pictures. It's even harder to say just what they depict.

Abstraction and representation fight to a draw in Berlant's exceptionally precise pictures of curiously indescribable things. About a third resemble landscapes — from the sunbaked, Joshua tree-dotted high desert of "Full Court" to the leaf-littered forest ground of "Morongo" and the rocky river bottom of "Untitled Romance."

Berlant's landscapes are never still. Every square inch writhes with vitality: Eyes, fur and skin come into focus where vegetable and mineral life seem to belong. In this hallucinatory world, the environment is not just a living organism — it's a slumbering, flesh-and-blood giant that pulses and throbs with awe-inspiring mystery.

Some of Berlant's works have the presence of traditional abstractions. The complex spaces woven together in "Zona Rosa" and the hard-won tranquillity of "Within" leave viewers free to contemplate the silent poetry of texture, shape, line and color, all masterfully orchestrated by the artist's singular and long-practiced eye-hand coordination.

The rest of the works occupy a vague territory between 2-D abstractions and 3-D landscapes. They're the most fascinating. And the hardest to wrap your mind around.

"Virgin Ground" initially appears to depict a fecund field aglow with golden grasses. But the more closely you look, the more uncertain you become about what's right in front of your eyes. The painting's shapes shift to resemble coral reefs, sandy beaches, moonlit lakes and star-studded night skies.

"Nocturne" takes visitors into the bowels of the Earth, where molten lava burbles

impossibly amid icy glaciers and distant vistas of the cosmos.

"Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow" is the longest, most panoramic picture. It makes your mind do flip-flops trying to decide whether the image looks out at the world or turns inward, into otherwise invisible nooks and crannies of consciousness. This is where Berlant is at his best, inviting viewers to turn introspective journeys into expansive explorations of spaces that extend far beyond ourselves.

L.A. Louver Gallery, 45 N. Venice Blvd., Venice, (310) 822-4955, through May 22. Closed Sundays and Mondays.