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Art | AROUND THE GALLERIES

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Joe Sola/LA LOUVER

"Rogue Wave '05: Nineteen Artists From Los Angeles" is a potent show loaded with sculptures, videos, paintings, drawings and digital prints by well-known artists and others just out of graduate school. Efficiently installed indoors and outdoors on the first and second floors of L.A. Louver Gallery, its 52 works include more hits than is typical of such summer samplers. Los Angeles is too big an art center to be defined by movements or "-isms," but "Rogue Wave" puts its finger on the pulse of much of contemporary art, here and elsewhere. Call it the apocalyptic carnivalesque.

On the ground floor, the mood is set by the sounds of helicopters and sirens, which spill from Joe Sola's video projection in a darkened back gallery. "More Cinematic Los Angeles County Museum of Art on Fire" shows black smoke billowing from the institution, crowds gathering outside, news helicopters circling and firetrucks arriving with lights flashing and sirens blaring.

Sola's cleverly engineered spoof has the look of reality TV. It updates Ed Ruscha's famous painting "The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire" (1968). Like that barbed picture, the young artist's looped scene brings a grin to your face that is anything but innocent. Humor and horror dance through the mind.

Grim fascination is elicited throughout the first-floor galleries. It's embodied most provocatively in Tanya Batura's extraordinarily realistic heads made of clay and painted so impeccably they seem untouched by human hands. Designed to disturb, the three lifesize sculptures are too beautiful to do only that.

Drew Dominick's model-size sculptures of a snowmobile, a chieftain on horseback and a pierced jackrabbit bring a Mad Max sensibility to art and history. Made of scraps of cardboard, foam core, drywall, lumps of clay and what appear to be giant spitballs, these grungy works treat sculptures by Joseph Beuys as the mirror image of those by Charles M. Russell and Frederic Remington, who mythologized the Wild West in the same way the German artist made up wild stories about life in Western Europe.

Kelly McLane's 16-foot-long painting on paper surveys a wasteland of worn tires, abandoned aircraft, ruined buildings and log bridges. Inhabited by cougars, elephants and pit bulls, her futuristic world is also filled with painterly flourishes and lightning-like draftsmanship, suggesting that art is not a hothouse flower but an indestructible weed.

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An undertow of anxiety tugs at the abstract works. The burnt edges of Mark Bradford's silvery collage seem elegiac. The bright colors and playful shapes in Mindy Shapero's crafty sculpture cannot keep obsessiveness or compulsiveness at bay, transforming even simple activities into traps.

Upstairs, a circus sideshow atmosphere dominates, but it does not eliminate the darkness. You hear it before you see it: Rhythmic drumbeats spill from a side gallery, where "Parade Video Installation #1" plays continuously. Created by a duo who call themselves B&T, this trippy video-in-a-tent harks back to the 1960s but without the high hopes of the Summer of Love. Chilly, mesmerizing and clear-eyed about the inroads corporate culture has made into the soul of creativity, it pounds out a frightening and fascinating vision.

Nathan Mabry's two fired-clay sculptures resemble the offspring of an ancient fertility figure and a frat-house prank. Lucas Reiner's three paintings of trees trimmed to within inches of their lives have the pathos of circus freaks and the stubbornness of survivalists.

In this context, stylish images by Sean Higgins, Violet Hopkins and Christopher Pate (the gallery's chief preparator and co-curator of the exhibition) look more ominous than they would on their own. They're not quite threatening but too in touch with destruction to be merely pretty pictures.

Not so long ago, art seemed to be either dark or light -- dedicated to exposing life's ugly underbelly or celebrating its joyous highlights. In contrast, "Rogue Wave" captures the complexities of the present, when events are often the opposite of what they are made out to be, and nothing is as simple as it looks.