

Bearable lightness

San Francisco artists find reasons to believe at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts' Open Studios survey show. *By Sarah Coleman*

Survey shows of local art tend to prompt the question "Is there a distinctive Bay Area art style?"; the answer, after heavy debate, comes out as a resounding "No." Of course, this is a good thing; it would be very strange, and a little Big Brother-ish, if our diverse artistic community was turning out some kind of centralized art product. Diversity and multiculturalism characterize the Bay Area, and they characterize its art, too.

That said, looking at "Selections 2000," a show of work by artists who participate in San Francisco's annual Open Studios program, I couldn't help noticing that a mood of playfulness and optimism inflected most of the pieces. Yes, there's diversity here: of media (wax, glitter, wood, lotto cards) and of subject matter (pop culture, gay fantasy life, homelessness). Still, if I had to choose one adjective to describe the show, the word would be *exuberant*.

How do we explain this? SFMOMA director David Ross rejects the idea that a mood of optimism inflects a lot of Bay Area art. Last summer he told me, "At a minute's notice, I could show you ten artists here whose work is as violent and hopeless as anything in 'Sensation.'" (Sounds like a fun afternoon.) I don't doubt the work is out there. But for reasons that remain murky, we don't seem to be seeing much of it in our museums and galleries.

This is an observation rather than a complaint. This year marks the 25th anniversary of Open Studios, which is reason enough to feel optimistic. Started in 1975 by a group of artists who wanted to open their studios to the public once a year, this still-thriving program is the oldest of its kind in the country. ArtSpan's juried spring show "Selections" provides an opportunity to see the work of Open Studios artists in a gallery setting.

"Selections 2000" focuses mostly on painting, mixed media, and photography and navigates its way through realism, fantasy, mysticism, and the absurd. Starting with a wall of abstract paintings by Olivia Brown and Silvia Poloto, there's a strong emphasis on color: Poloto's two pieces offer exhilarating, saturated blocks of red and yellow, while Brown's *Over Again* is a vibrant explosion of orange and rust curlicues over a white surface (sweet-potato chips come to mind).

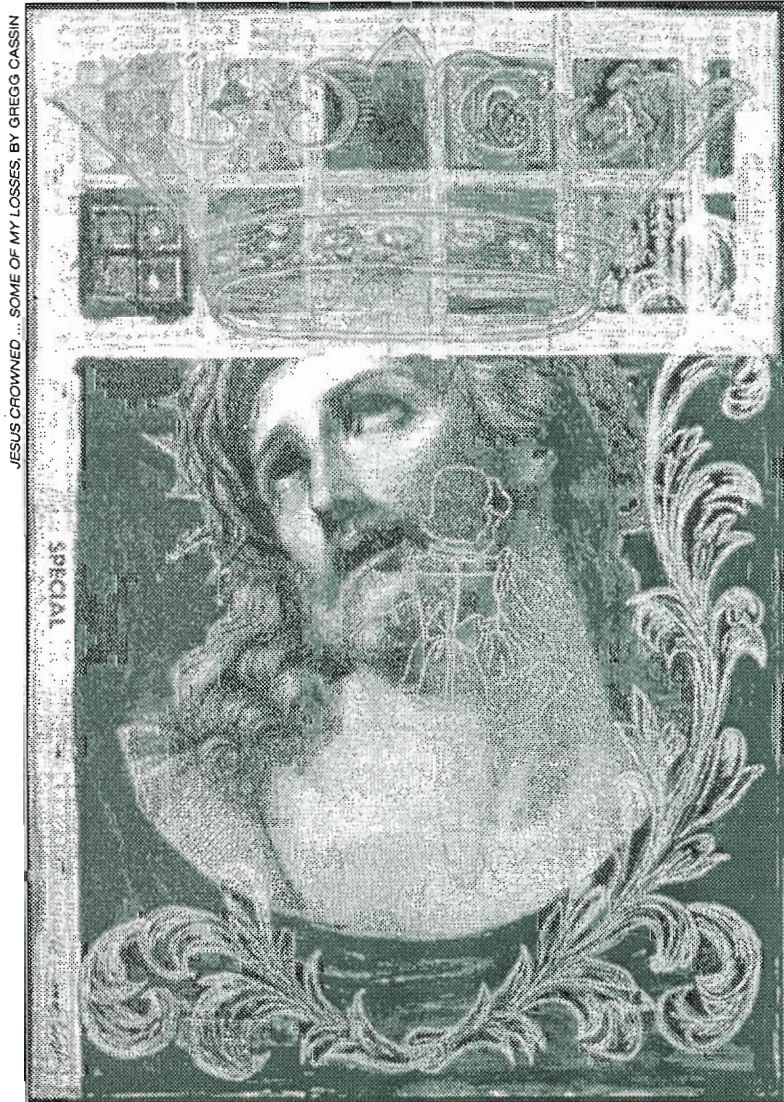
In the upstairs gallery, mysticism collides with the mundane in several large works. In *Unfolding* Mark Faigenbaum creates a mandala from bingo scorecards, lottery tickets, and stamps (is it too beautiful to be an indictment of consumerism?). Gregg Cassin's *Jesus Crowned ... Beauty and the Beast* draws an unexpected connection

between Jesus's suffering and the "sugar and spice" stereotype imposed on little girls, and in Julian Faulkner's *Spring Falling* primitive male figures tumble through a colorful and sexually charged ether.

Not wacky enough for you? Try Beth Shannon's lively paintings, in which giant fairy tale animals invade

how pain and fear can lurk beneath a bright surface.

Another artist who bucks the optimism trend is Christine Hanlon, whose *Serenity Base* shows two derelict men in a wasteland south of the Bay Bridge, a glittering city taunting them in the background. Hanlon paints the homeless with compassion but with-



Savior faire: Gregg Cassin joins other artists in combining mysticism and the mundane.

an Edward Hopper-esque world of piano bars. Far from being menacing, the animals' presence seems to affirm the value of a powerful fantasy life—a theme picked up in Rebekah Potter's jaunty, thickly painted *Crossed That State*, in which a red plane and three motorized rowboats putter above a patchwork of green fields.

At times, though, the sunny mood is deceptive. Greg Bruce's absurdist photographic stagings give us flowers as the protagonists in violent scenarios. In one, a steel blade hovers over the fleshy proboscis of a lily; in another, an orange daisy dangles from a noose. Bruce's visual punning is funny, but it's poignant, too: the theme might be environmental destruction, but his anthropomorphized flowers also show

out undue sentimentality: it's too bad (and a little ironic, given its subject matter) that this piece is hidden around a corner on the upper floor.

But all in all, "Selections 2000" is an upbeat look at the Bay Area art scene. And for that, let's give thanks. In a year that's seen too many artists evicted from their workspaces, it's good to know that optimism still reigns. ❖

'Selections 2000: Open Studios 25th Anniversary Show.' Through July 23. Tues.-Wed. and Sat.-Sun., 11 a.m.-6 p.m.; Thurs.-Fri., 11 a.m.-8 p.m., Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 701 Mission, S.F. \$5, \$3 students and seniors (Thurs., free to students and seniors; first Thurs., 5 p.m.-8 p.m., free to all). (415) 978-ARTS.