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ART

Swift to make their mark

The second annual "Supersonic" show introduces the work of 139 MFA graduates.

By Hugh Hart, Special to The Times

Plunked down in the middle of a South Los Angeles furniture manufacturing district rimmed by graffiti, industrial warehouses and railroad tracks, 139 artists from eight master of fine arts programs go public today after years of preparation in the academic cocoon. Their works — paintings, photographs, sculptures, videos, mixed-media installations — make up the second annual "Supersonic" show, this year at the L.A. Design Center.

The region-wide exhibition got off to a sprawling start last June when 120 artists from Art Center College of Design, CalArts, Claremont Graduate University, UCLA, USC, Otis College of Art and Design, UC Irvine and UC San Diego presented their work at Art Center's newly completed Wind Tunnel exhibition space. This year, UC Santa Barbara joined the lineup, and Otis dropped out.

But the big news for "Supersonic," which is sponsored and funded by the Southern California Consortium of Art Schools, is the change of venue.

Why pick an off-the-beaten-gallery-path locale instead of restaging at the capacious Wind Tunnel?

Amy Robinson, a UC Irvine master's student who chairs the exhibition's steering committee, said the consortium didn't want the show connected to a specific university site because "that would put too much

emphasis on the school being the host. This year we were actually looking for a contrast."

There also was the matter of money: "Our budget's about a tenth of what it was in 2004," Robinson added.

Last year, Art Center paid the lion's share of expenses to ensure a big inaugural splash for its new venue. But this time around, the budget was limited to the fees paid by each school."The catalog they put out last year cost more than our total budget" this time, Robinson said. "We did this one on a shoestring, and when I say shoestring I mean

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a *baby* shoestring."

Robinson and her committee picked L.A. Design Center in February, in part because of the budget but also because of the space. The three-building complex, dating to the 1920s, was renovated two years ago by the firm of John Friedman Alice Kimm Architects, which earned a design award for the sleek makeover. Normally used as furniture showrooms and warehouse space, the exhibition quarters, dubbed "Down Space," "Up Space" and "The Barn," were rented to the students by owner Francisco Pinedo for a song, Robinson said. The furniture was temporarily relocated because the owner saw the exhibition as a good way to attract newcomers to the neighborhood.

"We do have space limitations," Robinson said. "So for that reason, everybody's been thinking of this as an appetizer, where you just get a little sampling of everybody's work."

The effect is that of a highly personalized smorgasbord.

Days before the opening, Chris Bassett, a CalArts MFA graduate, was kneeling over a door-sized slab of cardboard in the Down Space, using a utility knife to cut out silk-screened contours for what was to become a wobbly life-size Ducati motorcycle. "When they're assembled, it's kind of sloppy and very obviously handmade," said Bassett, who titled the work "Ascendancy of the Illuminati Ducatisti." "You can see the tape that holds them together."

Precision is beside the point, Bassett said, because he's more interested in exploring his slyly subversive theory of "mystical capitalism." "The whole idea of making hand-built copies of these bikes, which cost about \$23,000, is a way to put myself into the Ducati Owners Club, which tends to be doctors, lawyers, bankers. I see it as the modern-day equivalent of the Bavarian Illuminati."

More fine-tuning was taking place in a corner, where two performance artists from Art Center who identified themselves only as "B&T" reviewed their video. "Becoming B&T" borrows from Busby Berkeley and synchronized swimming routines to offer digitally cloned silhouettes of their bodies, which appear to be filled in with silver-toned party glitter. Nearby, William A. Long of Claremont was weaving together his "Air Curtain" installation by wiring together a grid of cookie-sized fans normally used to prevent computer motors from overheating.

Because "Supersonic" has no curator or single theme, the exhibition functions as a tip-of-the-iceberg cross section of individual obsessions and passions. Among other works are Joe Suzuki's triptych, which focuses on a monkey circumscribed by the phrases "Speak Evil," "See Evil" and "Hear Evil"; Song Hong's sculpture of pink-tinted wooden blocks; and a mixed-media piece by Jaime Lee suggesting an aquatic setting as plastic "petals" spawn a fusillade of thick oil-painted daubs. Wendy Uzarski recycles industrial flotsam by twisting brightly hued foam tubes within a crib-like frame. Lauren Lavitt's text-and-photograph collage documents an arrest, and a painting by Fiona Jack places a blazing-red "Gaza" against a green backdrop.

Maeghan Reid, a Claremont MFA graduate in charge of "Supersonic's" exhibition committee, said she tried to juxtapose the artists' wildly contrasting approaches to suggest some measure of continuity. "Instead of setting up someone's whole MFA show in one corner, we've tried to set this up in a way that creates some kind of dialogue between the pieces. It's less competitive and more about artists coming together, whereas last year it was more, 'Oh, I get a big room — a curator's going to see this.'"

Robinson added: "Some people actually criticized the show last year for being like an art fair."

But, Reid said, "Here it's about being able to say, 'Look at all these other artists I get to be with.'"

Reid and Robinson agreed that traditional master's thesis shows remain the more complete showcase for an individual artist's body of work. Reid has only one piece on display at "Supersonic"; her master's show at Claremont exhibited 45 works.

In addition to traditional thesis shows on campus, which typically feature just one or two students at a time, CalArts master's graduates assembled a group exhibition of their own, called "Shipping & Receiving." It runs through July 24 at Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena.

At Otis, spokesperson Margaret Reeve said a May graduation date meant most students were unable to participate in "Supersonic" because they had already left town. So Otis, as usual, hosted its own graduation show in May, featuring both MFA and undergraduate work.

Karen Atkinson, a teacher and faculty advisor at CalArts, said that any of the shows for master's grads resist easy categorization these days. "The art world used to be much smaller and had certain movements where everybody would hang out together and do the same thing. Now it's basically a free-for-all. 'Supersonic' last year was pretty chaotic; it went from one extreme to the other, with hugely derivative work all the way up to these highly

conceptually based projects."

Trend-spotters may — or may not — be hard-pressed to identify the Next Big Thing at "Supersonic." But in Atkinson's view, the exhibition's sheer breadth signals a cacophonous hint of things to come:

"This is the future of the art world here," she said. "Some of these artists will make a huge difference, and some of them won't, but what they're doing now is what's coming up."

\*

'Supersonic: L.A. Design Center'

**Where:** L.A. Design Center, 5955 S. Western Ave., Los Angeles

**When:** Opening reception 3 to 8 p.m. today; 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays; closed Mondays and July 3

**Ends:** July 16

**Price:** Free

**Contact:** [www.soccas.org/supersonic2005](http://www.soccas.org/supersonic2005)

Also

**What:** "Shipping & Receiving: The CalArts MFA Thesis Show," Armory Northwest / 965, 965 N. Fair Oaks Ave., Pasadena

**When:** Noon to 5 p.m. Thursdays through Sundays and until 7 p.m. Saturdays

**Ends:** July 24

**Price:** Free

**Contact:** (626) 792 -- 5101, Ext. 116; [www.artserve.calarts.edu/shippingandreceiving](http://www.artserve.calarts.edu/shippingandreceiving)

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