

Look for exciting work from new, established museum curators

By Robert L. Pincus
ART CRITIC

The obvious choice for a central San Diego art event in '97 was inSITE97. There is no similarly galvanizing exhibition looming in '98. But there are plenty of promising shows on advance schedules, and some of the coming attractions are mentioned in this year's roster of art noisemakers.

One living artist and one dead one are on the list, because both will be the subject of pivotal exhibitions here. New curators make the list, because they will hopefully have a salutary impact on San Diego's biggest art museum. An established curator is represented, because she's giving us three exhibitions, which, as described, could prove tantalizing. And one museum director slot is included because the person selected will surely have an impact on the life of the visual arts in San Diego.

There are other artists, other curators and other institutions that figure just as largely in the vitality of the local art world. But this quintet of choices seemed to offer the most concise speculative snapshot for the year ahead. What actually develops is sure to surprise me as much as you. Wouldn't it be dull if it didn't?



JOHN McCUTCHEN / Union-Tribune

Someone to watch: *Diana Gaston, curator of the Museum of Photographic Arts, is organizing three of the exhibitions the Balboa Park institution will feature in 1998.*

New curators

The San Diego Museum of Art has three of them: Steven Kern, for European art; Scott Atkinson, for American holdings; and Caron Smith, for Asian works. None of the three has a major show on tap for the coming year and Smith officially joined the staff less than a month ago. But Kern and Atkinson's sensibilities are already making themselves known in the permanent collection galleries.

Kern has given the 19th-century European galleries a lighter color and an airier look. He has also added emphasis to French painting — one of his areas of specialization — accompanied by new wall text concerning the period. Atkinson has just done the same for the American holdings, which have been off the walls for a year plus.

Whether they will be allowed to strengthen the collection through high profile acquisitions or organize substantial shows remains to be seen. The inability to do either or both was an overwhelming source of frustration for a previous group of highly talented curators, who either took positions elsewhere, were fired or resigned. The successes and failures of the new trio will be central to the future of the museum.

New director at CCA Museum

There isn't one yet. In fact, applications are being taken until Friday. So if you know of someone who would fit the bill, spread the news.

Reese Shaw was the director who guided the California Center for the Arts Museum's transition three years ago from a modest, makeshift space to its handsome home on Grand Avenue. She oversaw the shift skillfully, curating shows like the current "Tabletops: Morandi's Still Lives to Mapple-

thorpe's Flower Studies," which employs theme as a way of making challenging contemporary art accessible to a general audience.

But the center's president, Robert Freedman, and its board thought new leadership was in order, even if they have yet to explain why the departed director wasn't to their liking. One strongly suspects Freedman and the board are merely groping for what they want. We can only hope they pick a director with a strong vision — and one who's allowed to go about his or her work without excessive monitoring.

Diana Gaston

She's been on this list of art noisemakers before, two years ago when she had recently become the Museum of Photographic Arts' first staff curator. But organizing three of the museum's exhibitions for 1998 warrants a return to the roster.

Besides, all three shows seem promising. In April, there'll be her survey of the celebrity portraits of George Hurrell, studio portraitist during the golden age of Hollywood. In September, Kenro Izu — recently featured in Gaston's show devoted to contemporary work with the view camera — will have a solo exhibition. It will focus on his extensive series about the ancient temples of Angkor.

The third of her curatorial efforts will be a large traveling exhibition devoted to Cuban-born artist Abelardo Morell, opening in November. He explores the optical principles of photography through pictures of his children at play, domestic objects, interiors, books and maps.

Claude Monet

You know the one: the painter familiar to just about anyone who's ever ventured into a poster shop. So why will San Diegans be hearing his name frequently?

You might have guessed it: a Monet show is coming to town. The artist will be publicized at the San Diego Museum of Art with the same fervor as the Romanovs were in 1997. "Monet: Late Paintings of Giverny from the Musée Marmatton" is the exhibition.

Never mind that it's essentially the same Monet exhibition that appeared at San Francisco's DeYoung Museum in 1995. This touring show hasn't been seen in San Diego. But it will, come June 27. Already, the buyers for the gift shop must be placing their orders.

Sylvia Gruner

One of the high points of inSITE94 (the '97 version of this big binational exhibition recently closed) was Sylvia Gruner's "The Middle of the Road." She had small figures of the Aztec goddess Tlazolteotl commercially made and they lined the steel fence in Tijuana's Colonia Libertad. It was a haunting work. Now, the Mexico City-based artist will make a return appearance for an exhibition at downtown's Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, organized by senior curator Elizabeth Armstrong.

Gruner will create a new installation for the show, which opens April 5. Other works encompass several media (film, photography, sculpture, installation and performance) and other disciplines (anthropology, archaeology and architecture).