

'Rowing in Eden' sows seeds of women's power, discontent

By Robert L. Pincus
ART CRITIC

A wide basket brimming with apples greets the viewer who enters the rooms at the Santa Fe Depot containing "Rowing in Eden." The blue that covers the walls is rich and radiant. The plants and herbs are profuse, filling a large portion of floor and most of the ceiling. The woman's voice emanating from speakers is resonant, lending an appropriately urgent quality to visionary lines of verse. The music is hypnotic, at times giving way to bird song or coyote howls. The installation feels like a garden, a surrogate Eden that invites you in instead of casting you out.

That stunning, thoughtful and unsettling installation by Deborah Small, which is part of inSITE97, is a journey back through the centuries, as the artist looks at the relationship between women and the knowledge about plants and herbs.

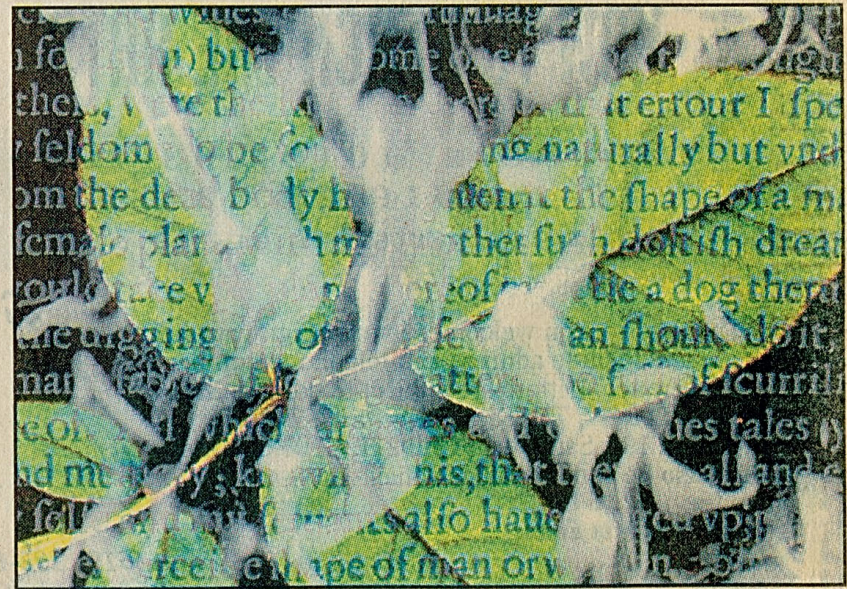
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Along the way we hear about herbalists, healers, diviners, midwives and witches, and listen to the words of poets Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Dickinson, Gnostic texts and the artist herself.

It is a journey framed by Small's vision. She did the research, writing and computer-imaging that are central to this richly sensory environment. But she couldn't have made the trip by herself.

Patricia Mendenhall, a friend of the artist's and a longtime rancher and gardener in North County, assisted with the raising of the splendid vegetation that fills the installation. William Bradbury — a colleague of Small's at California State University San Marcos, where both teach in an interdisciplinary arts program — wrote the music that mingles with recorded words and sounds. Actress and director Dana Case, adjunct faculty member at Palomar College and University of San Diego, lends the texts her distinctive, resonant voice.

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DEBORAH SMALL

Sensory appeal: Deborah Small's computer-generated images, such as the one above, form a significant part of "Rowing in Eden." At left, Small and composer William Bradbury in their installation.

Small

Artists' rich vision is far from garden variety

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Five years ago, when Small accepted the job at CSU San Marcos, she moved from La Jolla to rural Rainbow. And her new life is mirrored in the profuse plants and sounds of this installation.

Progressing into the space, one

DATEBOOK

"Rowing in Eden," an installation by Deborah Small, William Bradbury, Dana Case and Patricia Mendenhall.

Through Nov. 30, Santa Fe Depot, Kettner Boulevard and Broadway, downtown. Free. (619) 544-1482.

finds a small room (dubbed "Thunder: Perfect Mind") filled with canned fruits and vegetables, where the floor is carpeted with dry leaves and where Case recites Small's variation on Browning's poem "Development of Genius" with just the right balance between restraint and flair.

That poem means to collapse distinctions between hearing and seeing. "I could hear the day breaking," Case says, "I could hear the ground yawning open." And in the spirit of those lines, music blends seamlessly with sounds, both segue gracefully into words and all three merge elegantly with images.

The pictures are presented in yet another small room. There, images, natural and cosmic, dissolve slowly and meditatively into one another on a big screen. Case's voice narrates: The selections by Small and others are a paean to the fecundity of nature and to female eroticism. And there are also tales of women persecuted for pharmacological knowledge of plants.

The most touching story of all is devoted to Katherine Kepler, accused by authorities of concocting poisonous potions. Her son, the legendary 16th- and 17th-century German astronomer Johannes Kepler — a follower of Copernicus, who discovered that the planets moved in elliptical rather than circular orbits — apparently devoted as much energy and writing to the defense of his mother. She spent 18 months in prison, at 74, before his efforts got her acquitted. And she died six months later.

As the words narrating her life spill across the screen, historical illustrations of the constellations join them. Gently insistent chords, sounding as if they are emanating from a wooden flute at one moment and a keyboard the next, add to the drama of the Keplers' story.

"I was trying to become the character, give her a voice, though this is my own view of the cosmos," says Small, in reference to that story.

"I was looking to emphasize the strength of these women rather than the horror of the events, like the torture instruments used on her and others."

Women and plants

That view, though far more mystical and lyrical than in any other installation by Small, nevertheless continues her exploration of the ways women have been represented and misrepresented in centuries past. That work is, in fact, an outgrowth of a project done three years ago and presented at the Timken Museum of Art.

That show was commissioned for inSITE94, a broad exhibition in San Diego and Tijuana that featured numerous artists. This one, part of inSITE97, occupies a defunct baggage room at the Santa Fe Depot — which was inhabited in inSITE94 by Johnny Coleman's equally meditative "Crossroads/Baggage" installation.

In Small's previous inSITE exhibition, "Metamorphoses," she explored the life and work of 17th-century Dutch entomologist and painter Maria Sibylla Merian, who cataloged the flora and fauna on Suriname, a Dutch outpost.

"Though Merian concentrated on insects," Small explains, "her research on one plant, in particular, the peacock plant, proved interesting. I found out that African slaves used it for infanticide, so that their

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children wouldn't grow up in slavery. And I became increasingly interested in the fact there is so much knowledge about plants."

She was drawn to the relationship between women and plants. Saint Johnswort may be advertised in the windows of vitamin shops nowadays. But centuries ago, women were condemned for making medicinal use of it.

"Tomorrow you will dream my dreams," Small has Kepler say to her accusers. And the line carries with it the power of hindsight.

The artist is quick to emphasize the vital role her collaborators played. (Small is clearly happy with the idea that our interview about this project includes one of her collaborators, composer William Bradbury.)

"As collaborators, we remained highly respectful of each other's work," Bradbury observes. "I felt free to say whether an image worked and she would tell me whether a sound was working."

"The idea of having natural sounds to accompany music was an



easy jump. In general, working with Deborah on this was a lot like working with a filmmaker."

In Small's view, music and voice have been liberating elements in her art, allowing her audience to listen to the words in an installation rather than having to read them. Similarly, she feels her imagery works better as a flow of pictures rather than as static panels.

"I've been glad to have no more text or images on the walls," Small observes, glancing around the big room of "Rowing in Eden."

Concerning plants, Mendenhall was crucial. "A big part of this project was learning about plants," Small says. "There are thousands of them here, at least I think there are. Mendenhall is a great gardener, who talks to them and loves them. I may not be at the stage where I talk to them yet, but she gave me so much knowledge about plants."

Those elements of the installation — plants, voice, image, music and sound — are part of a kind of theater involving all the senses, a contemporary variant on the Wagnerian dream of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art.

Collapsing distinctions

Collaboration has been a mainstay of Small's art for nearly a decade. In 1988, she joined with Louis Hock, Elizabeth Sisco and David Avalos to compose a bus poster that created a national stir while the Super Bowl was in town. It declared "Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation" and had imagery that fit the message.

Many more like-minded collaborations followed, some of them pointedly political. A 1989 billboard, devised with the same collaborators, chided the city for its inability to attach the name of Martin Luther King to San Diego's conven-

tion center. Three years later, Small collaborated with Hock, Sisco, Carla Kirkwood and Scott Kessler on a poignant effort, "NHI." It combined billboard, exhibition and performance to draw attention to the murders of 45 women and criticize the handling of the cases by the San Diego Police Department.

The most recent joint project with Hock, Sisco and Kessler surfaced during the Republican Convention last year. (The new collabo-

rator was Cheryl Lindley.) "Friendly Fire," as it was dubbed, was a line of bulletproof vests that each made irony-drenched fashion statements about issues such as abortion and democracy. (It was commissioned by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and was presented as an exhibition there, too.)

It may be tempting to separate the overtly political work from more reflective projects, like "Metamorphoses" and "Rowing in Eden." And it is true that some of Small's solo efforts, such as her take on contemporary Romances and their origins titled "Our Bodice, Ourselves" (1991), are more closely allied with "Rowing in Eden."

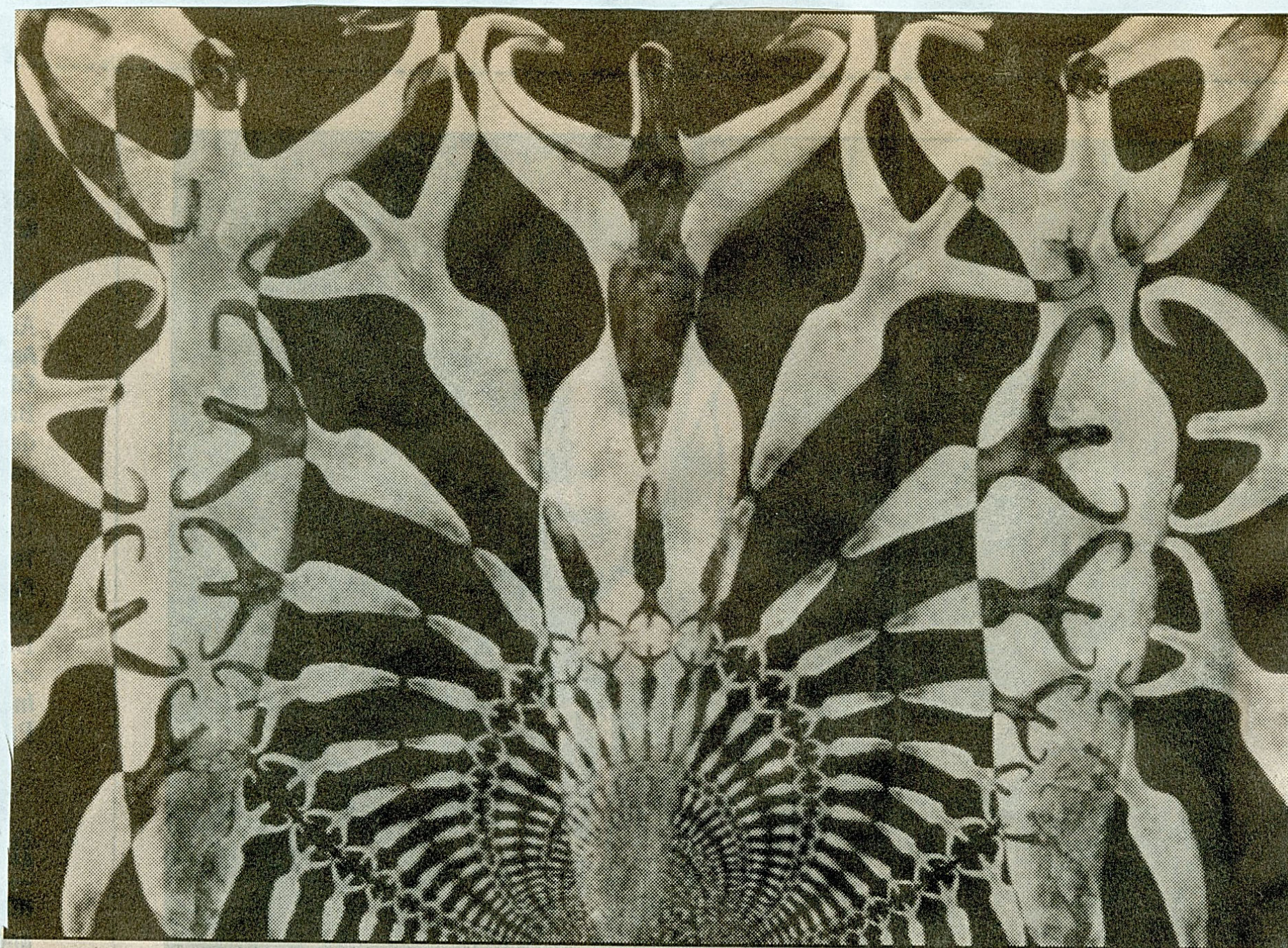
But Small would rather see all the work as part of a larger whole: "The mystical quality I want to achieve here is important. On a deeper level, this work is political. I think of it as political in the same sense as Rachel Carson's writings or Thoreau's 'On Civil Disobedience' and 'Walden' — works that offer a devastating critique of society but a sense of the cosmos, too."

Still, she admits: "It ('Rowing in Eden') makes the political personal. The 'I' in the writings is often me. This is the most autobiographical work I've done. I've put myself in this much more than in the confrontational works."

The voice that celebrates the female body and an alternate version of the Garden of Eden is her voice, layered upon our preconceived ideas of the same. It is also the "I" of visionary poetry, echoing Whitman's voice in "Song of Myself."

"I am neither the fall nor the redemption. . . . I am the simple affirmation. I am the yes and the yes and the yes," Small writes in a poem meant to offer a more feminist and joyous view of the universe than Genesis does.

"Rowing in Eden," as a whole, matches the spirit of her words. It is life-affirming art that delights the senses, challenges the mind and stirs the soul. It is one of the most memorable contributions to inSITE97 and the latest step in the evolution of one of the best artists at work in San Diego or any other city.



DEBORAH SMALL

Paeon to women: *An ancient goddess figure becomes a geometric pattern in one of the dazzling images in the "Rowing in Eden" installation at the Santa Fe Depot.*