

Explorations of our worth in the world

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Art Critic



A portion of Ben Anderson's "A Balance is Something" installation at Palomar College's Boehm Gallery.

ART REVIEW

"Beyond Numbers" and "A Balance is Something"
"Numbers" is an installation and related paintings by Ming Mur-ray; "Balance" is an installation by Ben Anderson. Boehm Gallery, Palomar College, 1140 W. Mission Road, San Marcos. Through Sept. 30. Free. 744-1150, ext. 2304, or 727-7529.

A wall dominated by number-filled plexiglass plates occupies one portion of Palomar College's Boehm Gallery, giving it a chilly technological aura. A wooden boat atop branches in a second room evokes both the integrity of manual craftsmanship and a pre-industrial age.

The first installation is Ming Mur-ray's "The Glass Wall: Beyond Numbers" (1991-92), part of an exhibition called "Beyond Numbers"; the boat and branches are in Ben Anderson's show, "A Balance is Something."

Mur-ray's numbers sandblasted in plexiglass look as if they should mean something. They do, quite literally, to the people who offered them to the artist. Judging by the amount of numerals and hyphens in some panels, they are Social Security numbers. Other sets of numbers appear to derive from driver's licenses and an assortment of identification cards.

A native of Hong Kong who divides her time between La Jolla and New York, Mur-ray exhibited a larger version of this piece on the East Coast earlier this year. But the truncated version will do.

On one side of the wall are the plexiglass plates with numbers, arranged in tidy grid. On the other side are identifying labels for unnamed people: "Physician Caucasian" reads one; "Artist African/Native American" is the text on another. And so on, across and down the rows of this grid. A key point of Mur-ray's is made in this way: these are representative, anonymous men and women.

Mur-ray draws attention to the multicultural nature of our society, since her cross section is so insistently varied. She also wants us to see that we are more than the labels and numbers given us — "beyond numbers," as she phrases it.

These are such conventional points to make and yet these are her key themes here. It's genuinely puzzling why the artist has gone to all this trouble just to illuminate issues that have been repeatedly illuminated.

By contrast, her compact, shield-shaped oil paintings on steel plates are seductive and thought-provoking. In this 1990 series, placed in a third room of Boehm Gallery, the artist's face appears in different guises. The self-portraits aren't easy to decipher, either in visual or symbolic terms.

The images, collectively dubbed "Self" (1990), are murky, even blurred in some examples. Mur-ray's palette is limited to sepia and umber, giving the paintings the appearance of fading photographs.

She covers a portion of her face with a feather mask, wraps her hair in a bandanna and removes her facial features entirely in one work. Two related panels isolate Mur-ray's arms and hands, the images of limbs placed to evoke the image of an entire adult figure.

These seductive images have numbers for titles, taken from other identification cards the artist has collected. Here, the clinicality of numerals is potent. It is at odds with the emotional intensity of the pictures, highlighting in a fresh

way the disparity between society's concept of the individual and a deeply personal one.

The design of the boat in Ben Anderson's installation dates from 1860. That fact alone reveals something essential about this artist.

This recent graduate of UCSD's Master of Fine Arts program is a Romantic in a 19th century mold. He yearns for the same harmonious relationship between art and nature so dear to writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau or landscape painters on the order of John Frederick Kensett and Fitz Hugh Lane. This is one of the ideas Anderson expresses in the show's overarching title, "A Balance is Something."

His sentiments take sculptural form with the sight of his "Grand Banks Dory," perched on a thick bed of branches. Anderson tries to address the issue of our place in the world, as it is determined by the angle of vision, with another piece within the installation, "New Floor."

This grouping of pine boards is actually a tilted platform. Climbing it and viewing his boat is evidently supposed to create a distinctly different effect than when the little vessel is seen from the floor. It doesn't and thus a major section of the installation falls flat.

That's too bad. Anderson's roomful of props has more potential for a sculptural and emotional charge than it fulfills. He appears to be an artist with a genuine passion for the materials he employs and a sensitivity to the history of their use. He also seems to possess some notion of where his Romantic vision should take him.