



Detail of Small's show, containing words of a colonist who spent much of her life among Indians.

SMALL WORLD

ARTIST TELLS HOW INDIAN AND COLONIST RELATIONS FELL APART

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rances Slocum of Pennsylvania, the central character in Deborah Small's new installation, was born a colonist in 1773, but lived nearly her entire life among the Delaware and Miami Indians. The Miamis called her Maconaqua.

Rediscovered by members of her white family late in life (she died in 1849), she reportedly said, "I am an old tree. I was a sapling when they took me away. it is all gone past. I am happy here. . . . I should not be happy with my white relatives. I am glad enough to see them, but I can not go."

These poignant words are printed large in Small's exhibition, "MA-CON-A-QUA/Frances Slocum," at the Linda Moore Gallery. They appear on a few of the numerous panels that fill much of a large wall — in quilt fashion, as the artist describes it.

Small is dedicated to the proposition that history can be transformed into art and like so much of her stellar work of the past decade, this show proves she is right. The multipanel wall piece accompanied by organic props — a highlight of the citywide IN/SITE '92 series of exhibitions devoted to installations — also

By Robert L. Pincus
Art Critic

Photographs by
Michael Franklin



MACONAQUA

*I am an old tree
I was a sapling
when they took me away
It is all gone past
I am happy here
Your work and mine
[working glass]
may be larger than mine
but this is my home
I shall die here and lie
in that graveyard.*

Frances Stocum

*and they will raise the pole
with the white flag on it
at my grave
and the Great Spirit
will know where to find me
I should not be happy
with my white relations
I am glad enough to see them
but I can not go
I can not go
I have done.*

prompts the viewer to see the roots of a contemporary dilemma in distant events.

At different junctures, Small transports us to the late 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries. Though the time period shifts as your eyes move across the wall, the setting remains the same: Pennsylvania.

ART REVIEW

"MA-CON-A-QUA/Frances Slocum,"
an installation by Deborah Small.

Linda Moore Gallery, 1611 W.
Lewis St., Mission Hills. Through
Nov. 22. Free. Call 260-1101.

Surrounding Slocum's words are abundant images of forested landscape and wildlife, extracted from late 19th century engravings and John

James Audubon's paintings. They evoke the New World landscape of centuries past, as do the tree stumps and vegetation that sit in the middle of the gallery and to the left of the front door.

Wilderness, as picturesque as it is to us, was also a place feared by the colonists. On the other hand, as Benjamin Franklin observed, colonists (and early

Americans) captured by the Indians were often seduced by their way of life. They took "the first opportunity of escaping again into the woods, from whence there is no reclaiming them."

Clearly, Francis Slocum was a prime example of this phenomenon and her story points the viewer toward a cultural dilemma Small dramatizes: the problematic and ambiguous relationship of the indigenous culture to the colonial one. It is a relationship that haunts American society still, a century after the majority of Indians were either killed or relegated to reservations.

Small's art persuasively suggests, without ever being explicit, that we pay attention to the roots of this dilemma if we want to understand its contemporary manifestations.

It's not clear whether irrational notions about Indians have subsided much. Consider the fact that this installation is part of a larger series of works prompted by Small's interest in a peculiarly American literary genre, the captivity narrative — of which Slocum's

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AN ACTIVIST AND A SCHOLAR

There would appear to be two Deborah Smalls. She is the artist as activist, one of four people responsible for the recent "NHI" project that looked at a number of local murders of women, many of them prostitutes, and possible police involvement in some of them. Earlier, Small helped create a controversial bus bench about police killings and a hotly debated billboard about San Diego's decision not to name its waterfront convention center for Martin Luther King Jr.

Small is also the artist as scholar, who calls research "one of my favorite activities."

The activist work, she explains, "is meant to rile people up in the San Diego power structure."

Referring to her art made for the gallery setting, Small observes, "This work is more meditative. I

wouldn't want to have that level of confrontation in the work I do alone."

Her current show, "MA-CON-A-QUA/Frances Slocum," represents Small's other way of doing art, dealing, as it does, with colonial and early American history through literature, art and documents of earlier centuries in elaborate wall arrangements.

Small has been cultivating both roles since her graduation, nine years ago, from UCSD's master's program in studio art. And they are not as far from each other as one might think.

She is passionate about the idea that the origins

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story is one example; and that the genre lives on in popular romances, as Small demonstrated in an impressive group of works seen last year at the Newport Harbor Art Museum in Newport Beach.

Though Small is a passionate and probing critic of history, she doesn't preach to the viewer. She realizes that complex historical forces were at work in the colonies and gives us a richly layered picture of how relations between colonists and Indians degenerated in Pennsylvania.

Utopia lost

In the beginning there was the utopian vision of Quaker William Penn for the colony he founded. It was embodied in a treaty of 1681, memorialized more than a century later by self-taught painter and Quaker preacher Edward Hicks.

Details of this painting by Hicks surface in several panels of Small's installation. But mingled among them are hard, cruel documents of the time. In the 1750s, the government of Pennsylvania had declared war on the Delaware tribe. There, like everywhere else along the Atlantic seaboard, Indians were either pushed out or killed by the burgeoning immigrants from Europe.

ny, there is the proclamation of war and quotations from other government documents that are shocking and brutal. There are offers of money for Indian scalps or prisoners, be they men, women or children.

Hicks' art figures elsewhere in Small's installation. He was most famous for his 100 or so images on the theme of "The Peaceable Kingdom," the prophecy in the 11th chapter of Isaiah where the world's children and animals live in harmony. Small uses details of these paintings, too, as if to suggest that utopian dreams survived even after realistic hopes for a Quaker paradise in Pennsylvania had been destroyed.

The way Small fragments images, excerpts from documents and Slocum's story is itself a statement about our times. Conventional versions of United States history have proved obsolete and debate rages about precisely what shape newer multicultural interpretations of the American past should take. So in quilt or puzzle-like fashion, Small pieces together aspects of the now disassembled past.

In a divisive time, can we hope for any more than a moving, fragmented portrait of the past? Probably not.

The traditional genre of history painting may be dead, but art about history is not. Deborah Small's art is forceful evidence of its survival.



Union-Tribune / MICHAEL FRANKLIN

A small portion of Deborah Small's "MA-CON-A-QUA," featuring panels containing details of Edward Hicks' painting about the 1681 treaty between Pennsylvania colonists and the Indians.

ARTIST

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of contemporary American problems are rooted in its past. The connection is always evident to her.

"There are always implications for the present in my art. Maybe I should spell them out more. But they seem obvious to me. And I'm not trying to tell people what to think about a work like this ("MA-CON-A-QUA"), though I'm obviously selective about what historical materials I use."

This exhibition has a bit of per-

sonal resonance for Small, though her art is never explicitly autobiographical. It focuses on the tragic outcome of the relations between Indians and settlers in Pennsylvania (Small spent her high school years in Strasburg, Pa.).

Until a few months ago, Small made her living as a teacher and administrator in UCSD's Warren College Writing Program. Now, she has joined Avalos (also a collaborator on the Martin Luther King billboard) as an instructor in visual arts at Cal State San Marcos. In fact, they are the art department at the new school.

— Robert L. Pincus

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