

Different states, and sizes, of coolness

A PLEASING ASSORTMENT OF ARTWORKS, FROM PAINTINGS TO SCULPTURES, MAKES UP THE SULLIVAN GOSS GROUP SHOW 'CA COOL,' INCLUDING THE EPIC CENTERPIECE, JOHN MCCRACKEN'S 'MONOLITH'

By Josef Woodard, News-Press Correspondent



"CA Cool"

When: through September 27

Where: Sullivan Goss, 11 E. Anapamu St.

Hours: 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. daily

Information: 730-1460, sullivangoss.com



"Wayne Rich at Sands Beach," Hank Pitcher

There are many items of interest, subtle charmers, poetic pranksters and ironically summery breezes to be found in the current Sullivan Goss group show "CA Cool," celebrating Minimalist-Modernist trends from the Golden State. But try as one might, given

its ominous sense of space, physicality and detectable gravitas, it's hard to ignore or get around the gilded elephant in the room. That would be minimalist sculptor John McCracken's large, shiny black sculpture "Monolith," strategically placed in the middle of the gallery — a magnet for our attentions and a stubborn point of reference or contrast for whatever else swirls around it.

As I came by the gallery last week, curator Jeremy Tessmer slyly slipped on an appropriate soundtrack for the viewing experience, Richard Strauss' "Thus Spake Zarathustra," the signature music from that monolith-minded film classic, Stanley Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey." But when one gets past the unavoidable Kubrick-ian kitsch response to the black monolith in the room, other more meditative qualities come to bear through more careful scrutiny of the object itself, and its art historical context.

Mr. McCracken (1934-2011), an artist who lived in Southern California for many years and who taught at UCSB for a time, was a noted minimalist who came from out of the cold, and from out of the West. He was involved in the minimalist "Light and Space" group of Los Angeles artists in the '60s, including James Turrell and Larry Bell, and Mr. McCracken cited the influence of that decade's reductivist thinkers such as Donald Judd and Don Flavin. Familiar McCracken themes were variations on Chevrons (stripped from the corporate identity) and leaning monochromatic slabs and planks.

A larger, thicker and firmly vertical twist on the plank notion, "Monolith" comes from 1977, a cooler period in his career. Minimalism was less relevant to that era's art scene, but the power of this piece has a newfound glory nearly 40 years later. In part, the character of the sculpture rises out of what it's not, in sculptural terms, a massive glossy plinth without texture, subject or contours, basking in its own dogmatically pared-down essence.

Even so, the palpably epic scale and the severity of the work's presence comes equipped with ulterior elements of style and meaning, with a stark simplicity. Its very heaviness gives way to a certain lightness of being, upon reflection. If not a statement of perfection and grace, it's a yearning thereof.

Other sculptures in the show head off toward decidedly different schools of cool, but with some crossover in terms of complicated messages conveyed through seemingly simple means. Masterful steel sculptor Ken Bortolazzo presents two iterations of pieces

he calls "WAVE," odes to oceanic, circular forces of metal in perforated steel form on a pedestal from 2001, and another smaller, cresting metal gesture in the form of a relief sculpture from 2004.

Witty assemblage-meister Dan Levin combines two touchpoints of "cool" culture — lounge culture and the skater's world — with "Rod," a pleasantly jarring sight wherein a skateboard is decorated in tufted blue naugahyde.

Any summer group show is enhanced, and up-classed, by the presence of one of Hank Pitcher's insightful vertical paintings of surfboards-as-figure portraits, and his 2015 "Wayne Rich at Sand's Beach" is another fine addition. Mr. Pitcher is one of Santa Barbara's finest painters, and another local art connection comes through with the presence of the late, Bauhaus-linked Herbert Bayer, who spent his last years in town. His small, lyrical acrylic on paper work, "Two Cones on Green," from 1980, is an abstract poem with what we could interpret as beach town braininess, with fragments of geometry as swim in sea green.

The painter's palette goes vibrant and the edges go hard in the abstract painterly verve of canvases by Sidney Gordin — his 1968 "June 68," all flat color areas interlocking in a jazzy array of energized compositional jockeying. The painting has a strong kinship with its neighbor on the wall, Karl Benjamin's "3" (1994), all irregular-shaped slanting slabs in monochromatic but dizzily color-wheeling shades.

In other areas of the exhibition, Pop Art and its latter-day offshoots rule. In Roger Kuntz' weirdly sensuous and vaguely Wayne Thiebaud-esque "Double Arrow 90 Sign Series," he coaxes artistic personality and real world observation into a painting of a two-arrowed road sign. Another artist famous for his sign and word-based obsession, Ed Ruscha, here leans another way, with his lithograph "Ballerina."

Even still, said ballerina appears like an archetypal shape-prop, in silhouette against a black rain scrim effect.

Post-Pop Art rears her cheeky head with Robert Townsend's "Some Like it Hot," dating from 2008 but clearly with the '40s in mind. More to the point, Mr. Townsend's painting of a matchbook decorated with pin-up girls — a small object painted and writ large — is an imagined nod towards a '40s pop culture he, and we, only half remember.

Circling back to the middle of this show, Mr. Townsend's wink of a painting seems to come from another world than Mr. McCracken's "Monolith." Or is it? Both artists hail from the left coast, with its rebel seedlings and wild west self-awareness, and both slyly tweak the relationship of surface and substance of the work they make. But in the end, what connects them may be the instinct for west coasters to find a sense of self in the teeming, dream-driven crowd, a sense of cool to call their own.



Photos courtesy Sullivan Goss

"Wave," Ken Bortolazzo. Below, "June 68," Sidney Gordin

