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Above is Elena Sisto's untitled work; at right is David Humphrey's "Drinking," and below is Megan Williams' "Rag Doll." The works are on view at UCI's Fine Arts Gallery through Nov. 6.



ART/CATHY CURTIS

Raw Responses as Raw Material

Drawings by Williams, Humphrey and Sisto Deal With Social Issues in Fearless, Highly Personal Ways

Listening to the intensely painful sexual eviscerating of rock singer Polly Jean Harvey the other day, I thought about how rare it is for artists to be able to dredge up their own raw physical and emotional responses, place them in recognizable contexts, and shape them in ways that express the inchoate stuff floating around in the minds of listeners or viewers.

While the rhythmic and dynamic nature of songs promotes a visceral itch and burn, contemporary visual art tends to do its dirty work on a more intellectual level, with an initial shock effect that becomes more powerful by virtue of far-flung (and sometimes fairly arcane) connections.

At the UCI Irvine Fine Arts Gallery through Nov. 6, Megan Williams, David Humphrey and Elena Sisto each claim a corner of that primal space with drawings that deal with social issues in fearless, highly personal ways.

Williams' drawings are soft-edged and billowy, with curving lines that churn up frenzied bouts of mysterious energy and transform seemingly perky everyday images with overcroppings of intimate body parts. But underneath a frothy style that looks like a bizarre marriage of Rococo painting and Depression-era cartooning, the artist inconspicuously undermines cultural cliché about women.

In "Rag Doll," a large girl in a pink dress and Mary-Lou's whose head is anonymously lopped off by the edge of the paper foreverly makes a lady rag doll in an awkward hands. The doll's bare feet fly up into twin parentheses while her vibrating stuffed hands turn into claws. This scene of necrotic rape as a stereotypical image of femininity—cast reduced to an object at once femininely fierce and powerless—suggests a nascent, painful feeling of power and indignance.

Williams' ironic version of an "Alien" is female, too—a lumpy-headed battered woman, with ragged-looking eyes, a startled mouth and a visible heart and arteries beneath her skin. Viewed by men in general as "the other," treated by some men as a subhuman outlet for feelings of inadequacy, she has turned into a 1950s creature, strange on the outside and estranged from her inner sense of self, worth.

Puzzling images of books appear regularly in Williams' work.



In "Flexing," a Shiva-like woman with multiple arms and feet—as if endowed with supernatural powers—is surrounded by stacks of books on which anonymous bare feet make mysterious entrances and exits. Williams' sole (untitled) installation in the show consists of a floor-to-ceiling stack of books and a real chair attached to a wall, where it is surrounded by painted footprints.

Perhaps the books represent the power of language—metaphorically strong enough to serve as a load-bearing architectural element, and sufficiently

resilient to serve as a platform for any number of arguments and rationales. Perhaps the all-powerful woman in the drawing is strong enough to bend language to her will. Williams' images in this vein seem overly programmatic, however, in contrast to the striking immediacy of her best work.

She tends to stumble when she takes on themes too broad and effortfully meaningful for her fizzy, one-shot style. Most embarrassingly, the three identical bald, covering figures in "Three Disgraces (Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia)" look like something whipped up by a newspaper cartoonist on a frantic deadline—there's no illumination here, no freshness or bite.

Williams seems most comfortable in the realm of surreal, lopsided physicality, as in "Fountain"—a white spray streamling from gray undulating shapes that seem at once masculine and feminine—or the boffo silliness of "Vase," in which the asterisk-like flowers poking out of a vase stuck on the head of a person of indeterminate gender resemble cartoonists' shorthand for someone who has been knocked out.

For her part, Sisto breathes rambunctious low-life into watercolor, currently the almost exclusive province of zenosee landscapes and still lifes. Her small, untitled pieces combine 50s images of women, advertising figures, cartoon devices, cultural icons and a winking sense of humor.

Mr. Pramat look on—and a crazy-profiled witch looks nearby—when Urphan Annie's skirts fly up to reveal her (colored) fur privates. A question mark looms over the head of a guy with a bulbous nose watching a striding, weeping girl who seems to be miserably awaiting the arrival of the Easter bunny.

A white woman groves in a hat sells as a formally dressed black family of pedestrians. A fat woman wearing a sailor dress and a bemused look is reflected in a mirror as a dog-faced version of herself. A wary-looking ski bunny standing outside a chalet finds a painted red target—and a pair of outstretched legs—on the snow.

The feminist issues obliquely recalled by the images are familiar feelings of helplessness at being viewed as an anonymous object of lust, the burden of being ultimately responsible for contraception, obesity as a

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societal taboo; the double-edged pressure to be a sexy "man-killer."

Other issues are class- and race-driven, such as the suspicion-driven perceptual gulf between middle-class whites and blacks.

By employing a charmingly "retro" cast of cultural icons and a dizzily exaggerated style, Sisto disarms viewers into paying close attention and—in common with many other younger artists today—exposes the perky innocence of the 1950s as a time of massive repression and oppression that continues into our own time.

Humphrey's mixed-media drawings are rendered in an updated version of Surrealism that also frequently refers to the Big Lie(s) of the '50s.

His obscure yet mesmerizing work seems particularly concerned with skewed internal states, oral

fixations and familial relations. Still, any attempts to decipher his dream-like imagery are necessarily provisional and limited.

A looming infant's face dripping scummy orange liquid from its chin serves as the primary image in "Drinking," in which the face of the woman in a kissing couple is repeated as an almost unrecognizable rubbery mask. (We're born with the oral urge; the urge to blot out unbearable reality comes later but is just as helpless and insistent.)

The supine figure (bag person? victim?) in "Spill 1" oozes over the ground, squashing a dog and spilling liquid out of a bottle; two huge runny eggs sprawl on top of the scene, attached by a single viscous thread. Is this about vulnerability? Life as a series of unlucky chain reactions? It's far from clear, but

the weird physicality of the imagery is memorable.

A man and a small girl whose bodies grow together like Siamese twins dominate "Snowman," which also incorporates the image of a snowman with intricately gnarled arms suspended on a thread of stretched-out chewing gum. The dumb fragility of a chewing-gum tightrope—the suggestion of father-daughter pastimes that actually were fraudulent and insubstantial, perhaps because the bond between the two was improperly close—pervades the piece.

Humphrey's insouciant mental

leaps, his infantile insistence, his flamboyant visions and his fluid sense of scale produce work that dredges up all manner of prickly thoughts and visions, and simply refuses to supply a comfort zone of correct answers.

■ "Megan Williams, David Humphrey and Elena Sisto" continues through Nov. 6 at the Fine Arts Gallery, UC Irvine (off Bridge Road). Hours: noon to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. Admission: free. Megan Williams gives a free talk about her work tonight at 7. (714) 856-6610.