

'Toons drawn from the dark side

Review by MICHAEL ROGERS
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The unifying piece in Megan Williams' show at the University of California, Irvine, Fine Arts Gallery, is a pillar of books stacked floor-to-ceiling in the center of the main

room. The books are balanced precariously and seem to be both holding up the ceiling and ready to give under its weight at any moment.

Coupled with this installation is a ring of black footprints on one wall, circling a white chair whose legs are attached to the wall. It might have been more apt to put the footprints and chair on the ceiling, since in Megan Williams' topsy-turvy world, contemporary society is in a dangerous state, ready to crash down at the slightest nudge.

The column of books is especially striking in its simplicity. The books represent a diverse range of subjects, including medicine, economics and law. Williams, who has worked before with books when she carved landscaped shapes into them, chose the books herself from the university library.

It's as if the entire history of Western civilization comes down to little more than a shaky stack of knowledge.

The book tower is not only a link to Williams' 12 drawings in the show, but also to the paintings and drawings of David Humphrey and Elena Sisto, the two artists whose work Williams chose to accompany hers.

Each artist makes reference to well-ordered lives gone haywire. In their work, the excesses of the 1980s have caught up with us, and we're paying the price dearly, often with our lives.

Williams, from Los Angeles, and Sisto and Humphrey, based in New York, all work in a cartoonlike style. Lately, it seems as though every other artist is incorporating cartoon characters in his or her work.

There's a logical reason for this: The baby-boom generation was practically weaned on Disney, Hanna-Barbera and Looney Tunes. Animators have probably influenced young artists more than abstract expressionists.



'RAG DOLL': In a Megan Williams image reminiscent of Saturday morning cartoons, violence — with no hero in sight — is hard to overlook.

But in Williams' case, at least, using cartoonlike characters is certainly not a case of jumping on the trend train. Early in her career, she worked as an animator in Hollywood. So it makes sense that her works, drawn in pastel and charcoal, have the look of frames from cartoons. But the images in her work are far more sinister than slapstick.

In one drawing, "Rag Doll," Williams shows a female figure being wrung by massive hands like a dishcloth. In a typical Saturday-morning cartoon, such an image could be commonplace and would seem to more horrible than any of the other hundreds of violent acts shown on television, particularly in cartoons.

The image almost seems like a cartoon stopped in motion. As a still, the violence is harder to overlook, probably because in a children's cartoon, the hero

would come along and untwist the heroine. But there are no heroes ready to save the day in this drawing or any of the others.

In another work called "Flexing," a woman works so furiously to build her muscles that all we can see of her arms is a blur. This is reminiscent of the work Williams showed last year at the "Helter Skelter" show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. There, her cartoon figures seemed to be caught in tornadoes, furiously spinning out of control.

Williams occasionally uses mythological figures to make political statements. In a bitterly ironic reference to the three sisters of Greek mythology who control pleasure, charm and beauty in humans and nature, "Three Disgraces (Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia)" shows three naked figures sitting in a semicircle

with their heads shamefully buried in their laps.

And in "Silenus," Williams takes the mythological drunken satyr and uses him as a metaphor for the overindulgences of the 1980s. Here, the bare-chested Silenus is shown gorging on a bushel of fruit that covers his head, as juice trickles down his chest.

There's something ghostly about Williams' latest drawings. All are done in muted colors on gray paper, adding to the gloom of the subject matter.

Of the 13 works, many include anthropomorphic objects, such as an armchair in "Untitled-Son" that assumes the shape of a monster enveloping a boy in a cowboy suit, illuminated perhaps by the glow of a television set.

In only one work, "On the Brink," does Williams get heavy-handed, when she shows a preg-

Art show featuring Megan Williams with David Humphrey & Elena Sisto

► When: Through Nov. 6
► Where: University of California, Irvine, Fine Arts Gallery
► Hours: Tuesday-Saturday, noon-5 p.m.
► How much: Free
► Bottom line: A well-ordered world gone haywire is the theme of this lively show at UCI.

nant woman on the edge of a precipice. Skeleton babies hang onto the woman's cape. Her other work is harder-biting because it doesn't try as hard.

Like Williams, Humphrey and Sisto use the cartoon style to highlight a dysfunctional society. But while there's a kinship in the darkness of their subject matter, they are at opposite ends of a spectrum in which Williams resides somewhere in the middle.

While Williams' figures are characters of her own creation, Sisto often uses actual cartoon personalities. Humphrey draws figures that are occasionally disfigured blobs and sometimes just cartoon body parts floating in space.

In Humphrey's "Spill I" and "Spill II," the nearly identical scenes look like pratfalls gone amok. A rubbery figure lies splattered on the ground, crushing a dog. The figure holds a rod that spews out puddles of liquid.

In a series of three mixed-media works called "Quarry I," "Quarry II," and "Quarry III," monkey heads and parts of human faces are suspended around central squares (the quarries) of painted abstractions.

In both the Quarry and Spill works, if there ever was a narrative holding these cartoon characters to the page, it has long been forgotten. They're in total turmoil.

Quite the opposite, many of Elena Sisto's small watercolors tell a story and include recognizable comic book characters, such as Nancy and Daisy Mae. But their stories aren't funny at all, often dealing with the subjection of women in society.

All her works are untitled, but the message usually comes across. In one piece, Little Orphan Annie's dress lifts up, to the delight of the Planters Peanut — complete with monocle, top hat and cane — looking on approvingly like a ringmaster.

Unlike most comic strips and cartoons, which are fairly one-dimensional in their design and story lines, the art of Williams, Humphrey and Sisto is multilayered in meaning and imagery. Their downtrodden and disjointed 'toons may be the perfect metaphors for this age of lost innocence.