



'Untitled,' Ruby Osorio  
Photos



'Indoor/Outdoor,' Van Tran

# Heady, Hearty Art at the Starting Gate

## CONTEMPORARY ARTS FORUM HOSTS WORK BY 2012 UCSB MFA GRADUATES

By Josef Woodard, News-Press Correspondent



### 'UCSB MFA 2012 Exhibition: Headgear for Tony'

**When:** through July 8

**Where:** Contemporary Arts Forum, 653 Paseo Nuevo

**Hours:** 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday,

noon to 5 p.m. Sunday

**Information:** 966-5373, sbcaf.org

In recent years, the best, most concentrated under-one-roof venue for taking stock of the energy and creative elasticity of the UCSB's MFA program has been in the heart of downtown. With the darkening of the University Art Museum doors two years back, for a prolonged renovation, the Contemporary Arts Forum picked up the slack of offering the MFA artists a space to show their wares and explore ideas in a legitimate, respected gallery context.

More than a stopgap gesture of aesthetic goodwill, the connection of smart and fired-up young artists and a long-standing space fully dedicated to contemporary artistic thought have made a strong symbiotic pact. And this is not to mention the added bonus of bringing some university art off-campus and into the urban thicket (if our swanky, tourist-baiting town can be accused of having an "urban thicket").

Enter this year's inspiring model, fitted with a willful the cryptic moniker "Headgear for Tony," the relevance and identity of which even program essayist Dick Hebride, an art department professor, gleefully confesses to be in the dark about. Never mind the Tony reference; here is art to soak up, puzzle over and take in with a layered sense of wonder, including curiosity about the future fates of these now MFA-boasting, emerging artists.

Not surprisingly given the nature of contemporary fine artists and the MFA program at UCSB, from the exhibition title on, nothing in "Headgear for Tony" comes at the observer from a straight or singular perspective.

For one thing, that old, ever-evolving and apparently never-actually-dying medium of painting is present and accounted for, but always with twists in the agenda. Jared Flores' large and provocative paintings veer in opposing expressive directions: "Raindance (make it rain)" is a garish, psychedelic comic booking affair with echoes of erotica, while "Roid Rage" is an album black void of a painting — a minimalist sendup — except for the hint of a asteroid, the said potentially raging "roid" serving as narrative fly in the would-be ascetic ointment.

Jae Hee Lee has painted directly onto the CAF walls, but with a mock-cheerful pathos suggesting advertising chic and faux marketing ploys. With bubbly color schemes, the texts become part of the picture and convey the underlying commentary on racial stereotypes and tropes, in "Evybody (sic) Loves Asian Girls" and "Kimchi is Kerchup."

Diagonally across the gallery space, and from another vantage entirely, Ruby Osorio's small images, of watercolor, gouache and color pencil, turn down the volume to a point of subtlety demanding quieter, closer inspection to fully appreciate. Once inspecting closely, though, we recognize that these ostensibly traditional interior studies and portraits are always in some way twisted or adorned by dissonant elements, without losing at least the promise of traditionalism and tenderness.

A graceful sensory nature can also be found in the work of Yan Tran. Tran's "Manuscript for Urban Poetry" is a video art piece projected on the softer gender surface of a scrolled Pelion Roll, and combines music and poetry/storytelling with a silhouetted animation style, broken up (and also poeticized) by disjointed editing. It adds up to a casual tour of both an urban neighborhood street, and a lived-in life half redrawn through the selective filter of memory.

Sculpture goes to town in this show, on its own post-conceptual terms. In Rimus Simaltis' looming yet somehow leisurely sculptures "It's T-O Somewhere Ranch" and "Boogie Board," the material list includes items proudly yanked from the everyday, such as lawn chair webbing, fragments of boards of the boogie variety, and other things found in a neighborhood hardware store (or corporate franchise outlet).

But the artist, pushing buttons with the "California lifestyle" in particular, upends and reroutes our associations with these materials, expanding our mind while tickling it.

Bessie Kunuth's work ranges from semi-wry "Inspired Architecture" series of formal constructions — in homage to Frank Ghery and to the humble building at 5918 Hollister Avenue in Goleta — to the ambiguous video "Screen Test and Head Spaces," projected on a wedge and redefining the concrete presence of its neighboring sculptural objects.

A different buzzing relationship of dimensionalities can be found in Emily Halbardier's grouping of pieces, between the black-and-white-ish painting of a slightly surreal interior (with a kind of literal couch potato as subject), "The Place that We Came From," in contrast to the mud and garbage-evoking gathering "Primordial Ooze" on the floor, playing off the jumbo tubular pink sculpture "Some Organic Something." We sense from her titles and the artistic experience that playful conceptual winks ooze between the realms of seriousness here.

An MFA show circa 2012 would seem incomplete without installation art projects, and this show's got 'em, with decidedly divergent viewpoints and aims. The tone is set from the very title of Nick Loewen's "Existing an Abandoned Home," settled nicely into one of CAF's side galleries. He plays with our embedded sense of space, domestic enclosures, and how place is imposed by archetypes, through the combination of a drawing of a cube, an actual large Plexiglass cube in the room and a tiny projection of that cube in a far corner of the room where this cerebral drama unfolds. Intimations of presence and absence dance around each other in this piece, accentuating what the other lacks.

It's a much glitzier, fizzier affair in the other, smaller CAF gallery, which has often hosted art of the installation type in the past. Using crumpled or stacked Mylar, alternately vulgar and muted mood lighting, black-painted walls and wooden structures of undetermined function, Tim Brown's "Looking for the Magic" finds its own kind of magic, transforming the room into a space humming with elegant funkiness.

We think Tony would approve, whoever and wherever he may be.

June 1 - June 7, 2012