

CALENDAR

Friday, January 12, 2007

AROUND THE GALLERIES

A can-do spirit and a comical approach

By LEAH OLLMAN
Special to The Times

Nathan Redwood's rollicking, rapturous work at Carl Berg Gallery has a touch of the great William Wiley's spirit — somewhere in its subtle irreverence, its disheveled tightness, its vaguely rustic wisdom. Somewhere in the feeling that ingenuity is the most effective compositional device for holding a picture together and making it rattle with urgency.

This is Redwood's first solo show in L.A., his newly adopted home. It contains four large paintings (a fifth, in the back of the gallery, is technically not part of the show), each packed with visual verve and wry humor and saturated with an intriguing, elusive mood that borrows from both doom and celebration.

The show's title, "Construction Under the Sun," itself seems delivered with a snort. True, the forms in the paintings look hammered together from construction debris, but their solidity feels tenuous, challenged by a beautifully chaotic, entropic force that pervades every scene. And the sun? It seems to have taken a long vacation from this world. A gothic pallor chills the



NATHAN REDWOOD Carl Berg Gallery

'CONDUCTOR': Nathan Redwood combines pigments of different viscosity to create a campfire scene of sorts.

air in one of the paintings. A toxic grayish-yellow sky burns in another.

All of the images are devoid of humans, but each has human surrogates. What they're doing resembles rites of survival, especially if the environments are taken to be post-calamity. In "Space Between," bodiless gloves grip the sides and rungs of ladders that rise, without visible

support, out of a skittish brown earth. In "Snap," two makeshift rafts bob in a choppy sea.

Redwood paints with diluted acrylic polymers, often applying lighter tones atop darker ones, which gives the surfaces a liveliness and dimensionality at a determined remove from conventional naturalistic representation. Colors are blended in a minor key, lending

the whole an underlying dissonance. The brushwork is bold. Every stroke maintains its own integrity while contributing to the overall illusion of place, depth, movement. It's a compelling style, at times ravishing in its effects.

In the painting of rafts at sea, for instance, Redwood crafts a spectacular division between the water's surface and its murky, alien depths. The brushwork of broad wavy strokes articulating the water seen from above comes to a clean break near the bottom of the canvas. An intense light gleams just below the dividing line, then dissipates into drippy, fuzzy streaks.

The downward flow of the paint reinforces the pull of anchoring weights (bricks tied in rope) strangely connected to the rafts' masts. The cool, palpable strokes defining the water's surface, the visible world, contrast brilliantly with the warm, amorphous netherworld.

In "Conductor," a campfire scene of sorts, Redwood again combines pigments of different viscosity to wonderfully disarming effect. The sky weeps like runoff from corroded metal; cloud-like forms within it appear as if extruded from giant tubes of liquid rust.

The reference to construction in the show's title applies as much to Redwood's inventive engineering of the painted surface (the eye's path all switchback trails and rickety bridges) as to the odd contraptions he depicts within. Scraps of wood connect at awkward angles to form literal stick figures with scrappy ribs and bucket heads. One, in "Conductor," wears a collared shirt from which springs a large, unfurling coil in place of a head.

Unlikely combinations of wood and rope, stone and car tires have the comical/mechanical air of something built by Rube Goldberg or staged by Fischl and Weiss. There is also something in the reference to resourcefulness with materials that brings to mind found-object assemblage. Redwood draws from multiple sources, but the fantastic, swampy, contingent, agitated, whimsical and foreboding concoction he creates is distinctly his own.

Carl Berg Gallery, 6518 Wilshire Blvd., (323) 851-0090, through Feb. 2. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.carlberggallery.com.