

Big and Little

With *Forum Rituals*, Michael Collins marries an Anselm Kiefer interpretation of antiquity with a Texan sense of space.



Think Texas and we are supposed to think "big." Like, gee, such a big state — you could get sensory deprivation just driving from Midland to New Mexico. The cult of bigness pervades all things Texan, which may explain why President Bush labors to lace his speeches with sweeping or absolute verbal pronouncements. Likewise, Texas artists are no strangers to bigness and broad brush gestures as the *Psychomanias* show at Barrister's so amply illustrates.

Featuring work by Michael Collins and Bill Komodore, it's an atmospheric show of big, loosely painted neo-expressionist canvasses that make for a refreshing change of pace from the usual postmodern menu of so much recent Texas art. Indeed, the problem with the best-known Texas artists today is that so many of them lack confidence; when New York barks, Texans jump, as the winds of changing art fashions in Manhattan reach gale force by the time they get to Houston. It pays off for them in some ways — several were included in the last Whitney Biennial (thanks to a guest curator who just happened to be from Texas), but much of the work lacks vitality, not to mention identity, compared with earlier efforts. So much so that it's tempting to conclude that Texans just really aren't much good at postmodernism.

And if Collins and Komodore are not as characteristically Texan as the earlier work of, say, Jim Surls, James Drake or Vernon Fisher, their vaguely art-historical canvasses evoke at least some of the wide-open spatial bravado that once gave Lone Star art its identity. Collins' *Forum Rituals* is a painting of a big old Greco-Roman ruin, perhaps a temple to some antique vestal virgins or what have you. Here a smeared impasto of clotted clouds oozes down crumbling columns entangled in snarls of ahrubbery and crab grass in a distinctly ghostly scene that sure ain't El Paso. If anything,

it's more like an Anselm Kiefer take on antiquity, with much of the German expressionist's flair for layers of oozing pigment transposed to a more Texan sense of space. Where Kiefer is claustrophobic, however, Collins' canvasses imply the presence of pick-up trucks parked just out of sight. By the time we get to *Spindle Twig*, the look has only gotten spookier as salsa-dancing lemons infest what might be some Yaqui Indian burial ground out of Carlos Castaneda. Grotesque and goofy, but propelled by vague traces of something akin to

inspiration, among other things.

Bill Komodore's paintings are no less expressionistic but here the smears are more horizontal than vertical. The effect is breezy, as we see in *Toreo*, in which a confounded bull seems baffled by a manic matador twirling like a dervish. Somewhere between Hemingway and Pee Wee Herman, *Toreo* evokes the ancient, existential tango of man and beast jostling for position on this twirling planet Earth. If Collins relies on texture, with Komodore it's mostly gesture, yielding interestingly mixed results all around.

If the Texas twosome takes a macro view, things get downright micro at the adjacent *Paperweights: Hand Made Artists' Books* show of handmade books that run the gamut from pristine to porn in as varied a spectacle as can be imagined. In the latter category, *Family Album*, a prurient if at times perversely funny collage book by the Circus Group, suggests a sub-magical mystery tour of body and other parts in various stages of undress and dress. Like a ghostly reprise of hippie happenings of the 1960s, *Album* evokes echoes of Ed Sanders, Yoko Ono and Fluxus slumming at a Rainbow Gathering, Yves Klein, Charles Manson and sordid assorted others.

At the pristine extreme is Raegan Robinson's *Pelvis*, her very Virgalian volume of juxtaposed butterflies and pelvic bone engravings on delicately translucent paper. Also fastidious is John Greco's *Home Prephination Kit*, a copper-clad leather manuscript with clear instructions on how anyone can create unique and interesting holes in their skull using commonly available materials. Show curator Myrtle von Damitz waxes lyrical in *What the Thunder Said (Personal Explosion Device)* — a metal box of painted nails with T.S. Elliot's "The Wasteland" inscribed on them in microscopic writing. The show as a whole is predictably mixed, as is only right and proper for an alternative scene that values

- *Psychomanias*: Paintings by Michael Collins and Bill Komodore
- *Paperweights: Hand Made Artists' Books*
- Through Jan. 25
- Barrister's Gallery, 1724 D.C. Haley Blvd., 525-2767