



Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle

"Dawn and Gemma" by Swoon is part of the joint "Witch-Wife" exhibition with Monica Canilao at the Chandran Gallery.

ART REVIEW

Bold joint exhibition is the stuff of dreams

2 complementary visions blend in Chandran Gallery installation

By Charles Desmarais

What has got to be the most ambitious exhibition in a San Francisco commercial gallery, now and in quite some time, has just opened at the fledgling Chandran Gallery downtown.

Ambition often walks hand-in-hand with risk, and Chandran devotes its sizable space to a collaborative installation by two artists — one a relative unknown — who seem to have had only a rough plan and lots of raw material. The result is visually overwhelming, a free-form riff with a pungent 1960s scent that makes me think of jazz, macrame, soft sculpture and the romantic-erotic assemblage works of the group that dubbed itself the Rat Bastard Preservation Society.

Caledonia Curry — better known as Swoon — and Monica Canilao, the artists in the current show, call their



Chandran Gallery

Witch-Wife:
Swoon and
Monica Canilao:
Noon-6 p.m.
Tuesdays-Saturdays. Through
April 1. Chandran
Gallery, 459
Geary St., S.F.
(415) 286-9537.
www.chandran-gallery.com.

Swoon is clearly the more accomplished artist of the two, as evidenced by such works as "Momento Mori" (2014).

"Witch-Wife" continues on E3

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



Chandran Gallery

Large, colorful works such as “Edline” (2016) show the visual punch that Swoon developed as an artist working outdoors in urban streets and alleys.

Bold joint exhibition is the stuff of dreams

“Witch-Wife” from page E1

joint project “Witch-Wife.” The phrase is an antiquated name for a witch. More provocatively, it is the title of a short poem, published in 1917, by Edna St. Vincent Millay. Written in the melancholy years just before American entry into World War I, the poem tells of a beautiful and beguiling, yet untamable and unattainable, woman. (Unattainable, at least, to men — the poem has been read as a lesbian anthem.)

The exhibition touches on many other themes: motherhood, time, poverty, myth. Far from any linear narrative, however, it tumbles them together with the illogic of a dream. That’s not a bad thing: The best dreams are full of surprise twists and mysterious turns, which can be frightful, illuminating or amusing (often all of these). Half the gallery is a double-height space that Swoon and Canilao have packed with precariously towering sculptural works, stitched and tacked together from antique fabrics and remnant objects, building to immense forms that might be female giants in Victorian dress. This is where the exhibition really takes off, launching us into a dark landscape of free association and vaguely cinematic fantasy.

What works less well is the decision made to present the exhibition in three distinct parts. Before you descend, down a flight of stairs, into the high room that contains the collaborative, site-specific installation, you pass through a more or less traditional gallery. This entry space is devoted to a two-person show of the artists’ studio works, with the length of the space divided equally —

objects by Canilao on the right wall, works by Swoon to the left.

It’s a very lopsided face-off. Though Canilao has an impressive command of tone and composition, Swoon is clearly the more accomplished artist. Furthermore, her pieces are much larger, and they are graphically intense. She made her reputation first as a street artist, employing an inventive strategy: She created large works on paper (one in the show is probably 12 feet tall) combining woodcut and linocut prints, embellished with paper cutouts, paint and other media. These she pasted on walls in cities around the world (keep watch: We may see some in the Bay Area in coming weeks).

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The visual punch of works developed outside, in big-city streets and alleys, dazzles in the close quarters of a private exhibition space. Once she took the work indoors for shows in museums and galleries, she added a third dimension by mounting printed sheets on wood and other supports, and building them into cutout sculpture.

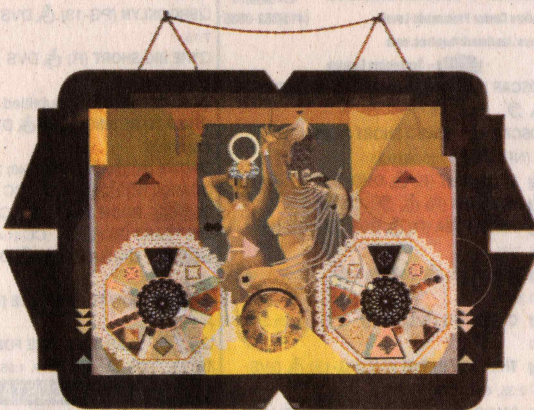
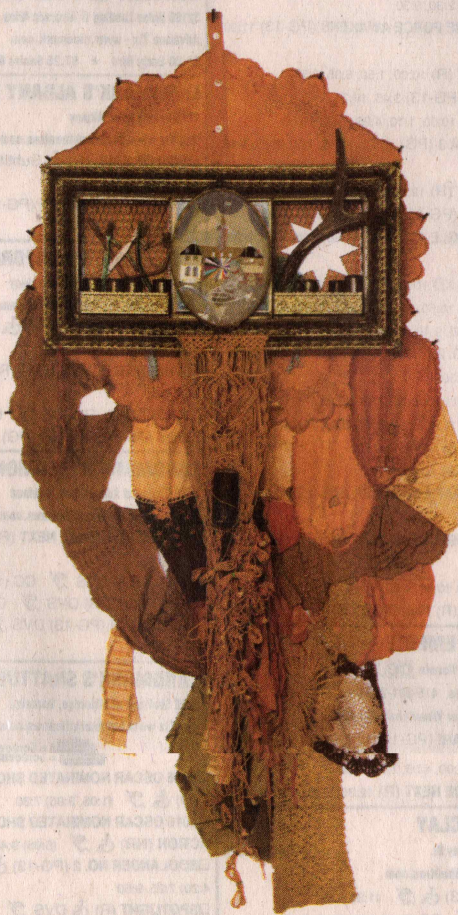
The imagery — often, portraits of figures both humble and heroic — recalls German Expressionism, or the political public imagery of Mexico (and its imitations in the U.S. and elsewhere) in the 1930s. From this basic vocabulary she has developed a visually and psychologically complex language, referencing cultures across time and geography. Her inventive approach to print-

making takes her work off the page and outside the limits of the paper sheet, but she keeps the parts of the technique that she wants — in particular, the medium’s reproducibility and its historical association with the polemical broadside or poster.

Canilao’s works are intimate, ingenious and lovely, incorporating collage elements and scraps of lace, silk and other evocative fabrics. Before she can be discussed as a mature artist, however, she will need to leave the shadow of Bruce Conner and other historic figures who worked in the bricolage tradition. That is not to say that her role in the larger collaborative installation is not clear, and clearly essential. The presentation in the entry gallery, which draws such a visible contrast between the artists’ color palettes and formal strategies (Canilao is obviously the seamstress, for example), makes it easy to see their distinctive contributions.

The challenge of authentically describing dreams or evincing the dream state has frustrated the most skillful of artists throughout history. Manifestations, perhaps, of the collective unconscious, dreams are, at the same time, unique to the dreamer. For several years Swoon has managed a project she calls “Dream Reliquary,” a website where hundreds of contributors have left descriptions of their dreams. By incorporating that bank of fantasy into an extraordinary environment of their own imagination, the artists have expanded their collaboration. The witch-wives need only us, the final element, to complete their spell.

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Chandran Gallery photos

From top, “George” (2016) by Swoon, “Bethlehem Boys” (2016) by Swoon, and two untitled works by Monica Canilao, all part of the “Witch-Wife” exhibition at the Chandran Gallery in San Francisco.



The gallery space packed with precariously towering sculptural works is the best part of “Witch-Wife.”