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Heady stuff out of Napa

By Victoria Dalkey

Bee Art Correspondent

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It's been called the most important collection of Northern [California](#) art in the world. The Napa Valley wildlife preserve where it is housed has been described as a kind of counterculture [Hearst Castle](#).

"In Our Time and [Place](#): Selections From the Rene di Rosa Collection" at the [Library Gallery](#) of the [California State University](#), Sacramento, gives us a liberal sampling of top-notch works from the di Rosa collection, located on 217 acres of rolling hills, a lake and meadows on Sonoma Highway.

Guest curator [Richard Reisman](#) writes that Rene di Rosa, who frequented Paris cafes in the 1950s, rubbing shoulders with the likes of [Jean-Paul Sartre](#) and [Simone de Beauvoir](#), gave up his dreams of becoming a great writer and settled for a job as a general assignment reporter for the [San Francisco Chronicle](#).

Eventually, tiring of journalism, he turned his aspirations to winemaking, purchasing Napa farmland around 1960 and studying viticulture at the [University of California](#), Davis, where he met many of the artists he would later collect, among them Robert Arneson and [Roy De Forest](#).

A passionate collector, di Rosa, born in 1919, continues to seek out young artists at the beginning of their careers as well as established artists like [William T. Wiley](#) and [Manuel Neri](#), who also taught at [UC Davis](#) in its seminal years.

While much of his collection is centered on Bay Area artists, the [CSUS](#) show focuses on artists who have had strong associations with the Sacramento-Davis area, either as students or faculty at the area's colleges and universities.

The purpose of the show, according to Library Gallery director Phil Hitchcock, is to make people in the Sacramento Valley aware of the di Rosa collection and preserve and to demonstrate how a collector got his start by buying reasonably priced works of artists he knew personally. In other words it's a show that says, "you could do this, too" if you were as canny as di Rosa.

Certainly di Rosa brought an astute eye and an educated mind to the task of collecting. While his collection is heavily weighted toward the humorous yet edgy Funk Art associated with Davis, it is of uniformly high quality. As di Rosa's fortunes waxed, he purchased ever-more-pricey pieces, always with an eye to enhancing the scope and ambition of his holdings.

The best thing about the show is di Rosa's fairly unrelenting penchant for challenging, dark-edged work. John Buck's "Naked Animal," a human down on all fours, is compelling and a bit menacing, as is Ken Little's moose head made of shoes, belts and extension cords. Robert Brady's "Sherpa," a large-headed cross between a figure and a vessel, is equally challenging with its surfaces stained the color of blood. And Michael Stevens' "Black Hand," a stick man made of pine with multiple enameled eyes peeking out from its head and body, is chillingly dangerous.

Even the often-whimsical Wiley offers a sculpture of a formidable metal screech owl mounted on a pair of sledgehammers that is more than a bit spooky with a haunting text that reads: "What the owl said/ When the earth quakes/ Listen to me, holding on/ Deep in the pines."

There is a proto-Funk darkness, too, to Manuel Neri's figurative sculptures, one a fiberglass shell of a figure of a nude man, as if he were a snake who shed his skin; the other a tense female nude with a marred, ashy surface. Arneson also walks on the dark side in his "War Head Stockpile," a mound of skeletal bodies heaped up as if unearthed from a mass grave.

There are some oddities that seem out of place in the show, including a weak Mel Ramos figure drawing, a Carlos Villa abstraction that looks like an explosion in an aviary, and one of Joan Brown's late, empty self-portraits mounted on a tiger. On the other hand, Mike Henderson's bold abstraction has a Funk flair and Deborah Butterfield's horse's head made of scrap metal is a moving gestural sculpture.

If you are a fan of Northern California art, particularly of the Funk tradition, you won't regret making a special trip to see the more than 40 works up at CSUS in "In Our Time and Place." From Arneson's "Jackson and Me," a cast paper double portrait spattered and dripped with skeins of paint à la Pollock, to De Forest's "40 Miles West of Rabbit Corner," a huge and vibrant canvas full of bunnies and other beasties, the show is a primer on one of the main trends of NorthernCalifornia art.

In Our Time and Place: Selections From the Rene di Rosa Collection

When: Opens Thursday and runs through Nov. 12, with an opening reception 5 to 8 p.m. Thursday. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday.

Where: California State University, Sacramento, Library Gallery and Annex, Library Building, first floor

Admission: Free

Information: (916) 278-2368

Group arrangements: (916) 278-4189