



MARK VAN MANEN/VANCOUVER SUN

Lisa Birke has seen some of the world, made a few observations about civilization and is making her most recent mark at the Bau-Xi Gallery.

Artist heaps world into big pile

Lisa Birke's densely layered painting continues to present her world as a variety of midden in giant jumbles

Michael Scott



RAIN 'N' HEAPS

New paintings by Lisa Birke
Bon-Xi Gallery, 3045 Gramville, to Sept. 28.

Restless in town, eager to travel to the world's wilder edges and attuned to the self-restraint of Eastern philosophies, Lisa Birke is the original Non-Material Girl.

Her densely layered paintings reflect a similar sloughing off of things: in this case material objects and the historical ideas that form them. The paintings in Birke's exhibition continue to present her world view as a variety of midden, on to which she flings — artfully — everything from art-historical icons to the appliances on her kitchen counter.

These giant jumble tables continue to bedevil the eye with their perplexing view points and, if anything, have become even denser and more closely packed than Birke's previous work.

Since graduating from Emily Carr in 1999, Birke has withstood endless chatter about the death of painting. In a town in which photo-conceptualism is king, and artists talk about making paintings with their cameras, Birke is adamant that her ancient art form maintains its relevance and its ability to discuss the world around us in meaningful terms.

In this show, she devotes a series of works to the idea of the scrap heap, although she points out in her catalogue essay that only in Western culture is a pile of material automatically considered to be disordered garbage.

"While travelling through Southeast Asia this past year, I became aware of how integral to life the pile is in many non-Western cultures," she writes. "The markets are composed entirely of heaps: piles of fish, piles of fruit, vegetables, spices, shoes, machine

parts. Westerners consider piles the epitome of disorder, in the East they represent the ultimate in the organization of necessities."

It is artists, who happily rummage through Western culture's detritus looking for new meaning. What better tool to understand another person than to sift through his garbage?

Birke's piles are accretions of foodstuff as well as characters of history. One memorable work features vast mounds of spent paint tubes and dozens of Birke's self-portraits, as if she were storing away every self-image she ever made, from childhood scrawls to elaborate faux-Renaissance portraits.

Another pile includes fairly direct references to the bluster and machinery of war: heroic statues, suits of armor, armament and warriors consigned along with the usual foundation of fishes, spent water bottles and feast hall leavings. A companion piece examines the distaff position with Playboy bunnies, servant girls and art-historical princesses standing in for the martial figures

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of the first painting. Here the excrement is composed of lace and wilting bouquets.

Perhaps the most impressive element of the exhibition is not a painting at all, in the conventional sense, but a pile of objects in the middle of the gallery. Many of the items have been laboriously painted in three dimensions and Birke's efforts here to draw her paintings out of the flat picture plane are noteworthy. The installation work is so heavily over-



Detail of *It Was a Brief Shower of Girl Power* by Lisa Birke.

painted it feels even lusier than Birke's already densely worked canvases. Objects invoke the ideas of semiotics and communication, with things such as computer terminals and keyboard and road signs forming identifiable parts of the whole.

Birke herself considers the installation piece a transitional art work and looks forward to painting more intricate three-dimensional pieces. She is contemplating another bout of travel. The past year she has been teaching animation to young children at the Arts Umbrella and she says she is ready to get back on the road.

On her last trip, she rambles through large areas of Southeast Asia, but particularly remembers her solo trekking through the jungles of Malaysia. Sleeping in elevated blinds proved a terrifying and strangely beautiful experience where the dark sparkled with fireflies and the burnt-red eyes of bats. The jungle was so noisy with anonymous crashings and growling that Birke was forced to sleep with earplugs.

"Moving through that world was like tracing a line along the edge of utter chaos," she says.

It's not so different, in a way, from looking at her paintings.

Sun Art Critic

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Heap of Beauty and the Beast by Lisa Birke.