

DREAMING OF JOCASTA

TONY SCHERMAN'S 'SEDUCTION OF OEDIPUS' IS SOPHISTICATED, POWERFUL

By Robert L. Pincus
ART CRITIC

The lips are large and sensuous, the eyes framed by a black carnival mask. The expression on the woman's face is rather off-putting, as if she were coolly evaluating the scene before her.

There are six paintings of this subject in Tony Scherman's newest solo exhibition at Scott White Contemporary Art, "The Seduction of Oedipus." (In some, she wears no mask.) As the title of the Toronto artist's show hints, the woman is Jocasta, wife and mother of Oedipus, protagonist of Sophocles' "Oedipus Rex."

ART REVIEWS

"The Seduction of Oedipus,"
paintings by Tony Scherman
Through July 5

Scott White Contemporary Art,
7661 Girard Ave., La Jolla; free
(858) 551-5821 or www.scottwhiteart.com

"Arrangements: New Paintings and Drawings," solo exhibition by Gail Roberts
Through June 28
David Zapf Gallery, 2400 Kettner Blvd.,
Little Italy; free; (619) 232-5004

Like earlier series, this one fixes on faces — haunting faces. And like his work in general, these paintings are in encaustic. Scherman has mastered this painstaking, difficult melted wax process, which gives faces a rich texture that would be hard to match with acrylics or oils.

History has been a prime subject in his art. In 1998, for his first exhibition at Scott White, he exhibited works from his "Chasing Napoleon" series.

Celebrities who met a tragic fate is another preoccupation. His "Blue Highway" series, shown in New York and Los Angeles, included sad, softly grim paintings of the likes of Marilyn Monroe, Jim Morrison and Chet Baker.

By painting Jocasta, Scherman travels even further back in time, of course. But as with Napoleon, he gives history a vivid face and implicitly makes the point that we're mistaken if we think the past is something that should concern only scholars or archaeologists. The lust for power exists just as intensely today as it did for Napoleon.

Jocasta doesn't represent that particular lust. Yet like Napoleon or the celebrities of "Blue Highway," her fall is steep. Realizing that she is



In painter Tony Scherman's interpretation of Sophocles' tragedy, "Oedipus Rex," the face of Oedipus' wife and mother, Jocasta, is central. Scott White Contemporary Art

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► PINCUS

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Oedipus' mother and realizing that he knows it too, she chooses to hang herself.

None of this grim dimension of the drama makes its way into "The Seduction of Oedipus." His Jocasta suggests strength, a subtle mocking of any gaze that meets her. In one version, she is seduced to mouth and lips; the image seems erotic and fetishistic at once.

The press release says this series is "premised on an alternate interpretation of Sophocles' play." It's hard to detect just what that interpretation might be; the artist provides no statement.

Oedipus is nowhere to be seen in his paintings. Jocasta, who dominates the

show, is clearly an eroticized figure, which isn't surprising given the psychosexual interpretation that Freud extracted from the play and which has become as familiar as its source. Given the artist's history with his series, more paintings will likely fill in the outlines of Scherman's view of Oedipus.

This problem aside, the paintings are gorgeously rendered and visually seductive. And there's something intriguing and ironic about envisioning the blind prophet who foretells Oedipus' fate as "Tiresias the chain-smoking seer." It's a touch of humor in an otherwise intensely serious and ambitious exhibition.