

"In-Exterior," sculptures by Foon Sham

Through June 3; Scott White Contemporary Art, 2400 Kettner Blvd., Little Italy
Free; (619) 501-5689 or www.scottwhiteart.com

"The Butterfly Knife Sonatas," paintings and drawings by Blaine Fontana

Through June 3; Distinction Gallery, 317 E. Grand Ave., Escondido
Free; (760) 781-5779 or www.distinctionart.com

ART REVIEW

BREAKING DOWN WALLS

**Sham fuses craft, structure;
Fontana fuses fantasy, social commentary**

By **Robert L. Pincus**
ART CRITIC

There is an architect inside of Foon Sham. He employs the elements of his sculptures as if he were constructing a building.

This doesn't mean that the sculptures on view at Scott White Contemporary Art resemble edifices. In fact, most don't.

The artist, who teaches at the University of Maryland, has good reason for titling his solo exhibition "In-Exterior," because his creations often break down any distinction between inside and outside.

Done in small blocks of walnut and cherry, "Opening" displays his concept forcefully. He's created rounded walls in walnut and cherry with small blocks of both, which appear as if they should continue all the way around the sculpture — but they don't. Instead, the structure recedes into what would look like an interior, except there's nothing in front of it. The effect is akin to that of a graphic image of a house with a cutaway that reveals the rooms within.

"Opening" looks like a cross between a tower and a female figure without head or lower legs. The gaps in its blocks — the openings — have both an erotic and a ritualistic dimension to them.

Sham is an artist who is as enthralled with craft as with structure. You can see his intense devotion in all nine of the works on view. The exactness of a sculpture like "Opening," as well as the dizzying quantity of units that create the whole, are both seductive qualities in his work.

Wood is a common denominator in this show, as in so much of his recent work. But shifting from piece to piece, there are dramatic differences in how he uses it.

"Passage I," done in walnut, cherry and ash, appears as if there were a sort of low-tech faucet in the wall, which was sending a stream of water into a slender vessel on the floor. Its method of construction is similar to that of "Opening."

For "Spiral Vessel," he uses a different wood, Philippine mahogany, and its walls have a strikingly different style. This is because the individual portions of Sham's sculpture are prefabricated sections of hardwood floor. Sham adapts them gracefully to an S-shaped form, standing nearly 3 feet tall and 5 feet long, that he calls "Spiral Vessel."

The work has its parallels in postminimalist contemporary sculpture, Martin Puryear's work prime among them. But Sham, a native of China who trained in the United States, has forged his own intimate relation to his medium and his objects exude their own pensive sort of power.

Invented faces

Blaine Fontana prefers fantastical creatures to people: beings with melancholy faces that wear shells and sometimes sprout vegetation or quills. Seen one way, they are stand-ins for us. Seen another, they are gentler folk than us, attuned to nature in ways that we aren't. He calls them "templings," grafting "temple" to "being."

"The Butterfly Knife Sonatas" at Distinction Gallery in Escondido is his first solo exhibition in San Diego County, but two years ago he had one of the strongest paintings in the first and only exhibition at the District Three Gallery in Golden Hill. His new show suggests that that picture wasn't an anomaly.

Fontana, who lives and works in Long Beach, has a quirky vision that fuses fantasy and social commentary, the secular with the mystical,



Foon Sham, who grew up in Macao, China, but trained as an artist in the United States, is having his first solo exhibition in San Diego. The works in wood include "Passage I." Scott White Contemporary Art



Blaine Fontana's swirl of fish in "The Last Koi Chapter 1" display odd markings, as if the species is mutating. As in many other paintings, the background turns nature into pattern. Distinction Gallery

lush painting with caricature. He's part of a large number of younger artists who do commercial design and exhibit personal work, but there is a sophisticated poetic strain in his art that sets it apart from a lot of work exploring similar territory. "Come Alive Mr. Truffalump" is poignant. One of his templings sits on a tree stump, a book in his lap. There's a tree with a little house in its upper reaches and billowy foliage that resembles a thick blue cloud.

The meadow is red and the sky is patterned like painterly wallpaper.

This painting isn't specific in its symbolism, but it is thick with atmosphere. It's hard not to feel as if the natural world is having a hard time of it in this and other pictures. His templings appear to feel the pain of the environment's deteriorating condition more than we do.

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