

THE DOWNTOWN TOUR

'Oceans Ten' and 'Sift Series' are worth sifting through

By Neil Kendrick

Artists inspired by nature often walk a fine line between creating thought-provoking artworks reflecting on the natural world and more decorative art that provides a purely aesthetically pleasing experience without any intellectual clutter.

However, the paintings in Clifford Smith's show "Oceans Ten" fall somewhere between these two categories as his images capture the ocean's innate and timeless beauty with a sure yet delicate touch.

"Oceans Ten" is also perfect for Southern Californian viewers who might identify with the artist's relationship with the ocean as an endless reservoir of possibilities.

Upon entering downtown's Scott White Contemporary Art gallery, the first piece viewers will encounter is "Gray Ocean Peaks." Like all of the exhibition's 10 paintings on display through April 15, this photorealistic piece is rendered in monochromatic tones. An equally limited color palette can be found in most of Smith's work including the 2005-2006 piece "Rolling Gray Waves," among others.

The artist's close observations of his subject matter have resulted in a body of work that functions as a series of freeze frames of a mind's



Clifford Smith's "Oceans Ten" paintings study the opaque and transparent qualities of water as nature provides a looking glass to a more meditative frame of mind. *Clifford Smith*

eye view of a body of water constantly in flux.

His collection of painted moments unfolds from a highly subjective point of view, and it wouldn't be too far of a stretch to say that Smith's paintings evoke an air of introspection. But Smith's ocean-inspired artworks are more than pretty pictures or formal exercises about color. His paintings study the opaque and transparent qualities of water with an almost Zen-like focus as nature provides a looking glass to a more meditative frame of mind.

Most of Smith's paintings are devoid of any human presence. But two works, 2005's "Pacific Ocean (Aislinn)" and "Pacific Ocean (Camille)," deviate from this strategy by featuring images of young women staring at the ocean with their backs to the viewer.

In the artist's statement, Smith explains that these figures with their backs to the viewer are portraits of his daughters. Both females appear on the verge of darting into the inviting surf.

But the two paintings' subtle differences are revealed in the solitary figures' contrasting body lan-

guage. While the young woman in "Pacific Ocean (Aislinn)" appears eager and playful, her counterpart in "Pacific Ocean (Camille)" is more hesitant and, perhaps, even fearful of the water. In the latter piece, Smith emphasizes this point by rendering the figure with her hands covering her face.

Peculiar direction

Likewise, local sculptor Richard Keely's "The Sift Series" at downtown's Simayspace allows the work to find its own peculiar direction via the artmaking process. His latest mixed-media artworks on display through April 26 reflect the artist's tendencies as part artistic hunter-and-gatherer, part

alchemist searching for a personal philosopher's stone hidden among the cultural detritus that finds its way into his studio.

In Keely's hands, an old leather hat and pink, plastic purses gently morph into strange, ambiguous forms that suggest the human body both within and without. During a recent gallery talk, the artist explained that his art wasn't about specific ideas per se. Rather, pieces like 2004's "Purge" and 2005's "Trophy" attempt to reach for other possibilities without sacrificing their mysterious ambiguity.

Neil Kendrick is a San Diego artist and writer, and the film curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego.



Richard Keely's "The Sift Series" reflects the artist's tendencies as part artistic hunter-and-gatherer. *Richard Keely*

DATEBOOK

"Oceans Ten," paintings by Clifford Smith, and "Gems: Modern & Contemporary Master Works"

Through April 15; Scott White

Contemporary Art, 2400 Kettner Blvd., downtown; free; (619) 501-5689 or www.scottwhiteart.com

"The Sift Series," sculptures by Richard Keely

Through April 26; Simayspace, Art

Academy of San Diego, 840 G St., downtown; free; (619) 231-3900