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Emphasizing the looks, not meaning

By David Pagel
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In the old days, curators took poetic license and organized group shows around their feelings for favorite songs, movies and short stories, not to mention candy bars, turns of phrase and out-of-the-way places. Such free-wheeling subjectivity has gone out of fashion, replaced by the solemnity of supposed scholarly seriousness.

"Without Sun," a two-venue group show organized by independent curator Carole Ann Klonarides, brings the intellectual playfulness of organizing shows in the 1980s up to the moment. At the Christopher Grimes Gallery and the Chung King Project, the seven-artist exhibition stands out as one of the best of recent memory because it puts more emphasis on how things look than on what they mean.

The paintings, by Dan Bayles, Thom Merrick, Joshua Podoll and Elizabeth Tremante, have the presence of cataclysmic landscapes. In them, the visible world is a slippery continuum of abstraction and representation. It's impossible to distinguish reality from its virtual doppelgänger.

The sculptures, by Case Culkins and Anna Sew Hoy, do something similar to three-dimensional space. They form columns, pilings and blobs of ordinary things and everyday shapes, somehow making them strange, like the flotsam and jetsam of an imaginary world that has crash-landed.

The show's only misstep is a video and a three-part drawing by Euan Macdonald. These one-dimensional works lack the loopy complexity and stimulating ambiguity of the others.

If there is a meaningful theme to "Without Sun," it's that meaning is elusive — that it's most provocative when it slips beyond the horizon or gets stuck on tip of the tongue, like something you know but cannot say, despite your best efforts.

Christopher Grimes Gallery, 916 Colorado Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 587-3373, through May 26. Closed Sunday and Monday. www.cgrimes.com

Chung King Project, 936 Chung King Road, L.A., (213) 625-1802, through June 9. Closed Sundays through Tuesdays. www.chungkingproject.com



Installation View, Christopher Grimes Gallery