



A detail from Sumakshi Singh's installation, "Urban Fungus," on view in "Paying Attention" at Creative Arts Workshop.

Where fungi meet broken glass, and starfish cluster in the sand

By Judy Birke

NEW HAVEN — The title of the exhibition is "Paying Attention," and that's exactly what these 23 artists are doing, whether their works are abstract or representational, painterly or conceptual, inexplicit or self-evident.

"Paying Attention," a national juried show, is on view through May 30 at Creative Arts Workshop. Juror Susanna Coffey gives eloquent expression to its guiding principle when she writes: "For a visual artist, a direct observation requires more than a quick glance, a cursory thought. We must pay attention. That involves a full engagement between the

artist, the working process and the subject matter."

One might add that the best artists further extend their responsibilities, finding a way in which to activate a reciprocal engagement between the viewer and the work.

That is precisely what makes this exhibition so complete.

The artists have indeed considered all aspects of their mission, and the payoff is an authentic, accomplished presentation in which the pieces stand up for themselves, play off each other well and permit the audience easy access.

The 49 paintings, drawings, sculptures,

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Ronald Gonzalez's "Self-Portrait with Starfish: The Sea," made of cast plaster, sand, glue, carbon, starfish and wire.

'Attention': Where fungi and moss meet broken glass

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photographs, videos and installations are fine blends of narrative and aesthetic.

A number of works convey a compelling uncertainty, inviting the viewer to enter a world in which associations and interpretations are ambiguous and disquieting.

Sumakshi Singh's "Urban Fungus," an extensive and fascinating installation that takes up one corner of the gallery space, reveals an enigmatic world of microenvironments in which drips, oozes, blobs and various questionable life forms appear to implant themselves on the walls from floor to ceiling.

Singh explores the interplay between organic elements, such as fungi and moss, and the urban environment. In addition, she appears to consider the connection between the rationality of defined space and the potential of irrational flux within that space.

Ronald Gonzalez's Giacometti-like sculptures of skeletal figures in mythical environments are an interesting blend of form and content.

Open to more than one interpretation, these works contain an interesting juxtaposition of biography and myth, reality and uncertainty. An unnerving psychological subtext seems to explore the mysteries of the human condition, simultaneously isolated and involved.

"Calculating the Odds," an oil painting by Leslie Bell, also reveals a world of indeterminate conclusions. A single figure explores an uncertain state of mind in which she is about to test the private reveries of her internal world against the inevitable realities of the external.

IF YOU GO

Show: "Paying Attention"
Place: Creative Arts Workshop,
80 Audubon St., New Haven
When: Through May 30, Mon.-
Fri. 9 a.m.-5:30 p.m.
Admission: Free
Info: (203) 562-4927

Some works, in which the artists find meaning in the familiar, have a lovely appeal.

Steven Budington's "Abridged," an oil painting of dictionary pages, has a refreshing purity and physical presence. The crisp economy of painterly brushstrokes evokes a visceral energy that reveals the artist's obvious delight in the act of painting.

Anna Hostvedt's series of intimate landscapes conveys a quiet reverence for nature. Their lyrical sensibilities probe the moody atmosphere and soundless memories of the natural world.

Bryan Baker, too, gives new meaning to the commonplace.

In creating his large installation, which memorializes discarded objects, he asked people to fill out a form calling for a physical description, a speculative history and a possible use for each object. The responses he got are most interesting and diverse, including the conclusions, for example, that a broken mirror could be used for vanity or suicide, and a plastic stick could be used to stir alcoholic beverages or stab demons.

Judy Birke of New Haven is a freelance writer and art consultant.