

ART

AROUND THE GALLERIES

Erotic passion serves as a guide

SHARON MIZOTA

Since the mid-1960s, Dorothy Iannone has depicted female sexuality as a force to be reckoned with. Her frank, colorful explorations of sex, love and desire are painted in a naive, graphic style, often accompanied by decorative patterns and handwritten narratives. Although laced with undercurrents of pain and tension that inevitably accompany such subject matter, they are for the most part ecstatic, delightfully direct celebrations of women's sexual power.

A contemporary of early feminist artists such as Judy Chicago and Sylvia Sleigh, who sought to counter sexism with a distinctly feminine aesthetic, Iannone has charted a different path. Her work is deeply personal and unmistakably feminine yet seems blissfully unconcerned with dismantling the trappings of patriarchy. In her world, women and men are both governed by the dictates of erotic passion.

Her first solo show in Los Angeles, at Peres Projects, is a tantalizing sample of 15 works dating from the early '60s to the present. It's part of a growing interest in the 76-year-old Berlin-based artist, who was born in Boston but had her first solo museum exhibition in the U.S. only last year at New York's New Museum.

In Iannone's idiosyncratic visual language, breasts are usually represented as circles within circles, genitalia often appear atop people's clothing and a woman's swollen labia can be as large and round as testes. In "Think You There Was..." from 1972, a woman bends over backward as a man penetrates her. The woman's bright red nipples, which jut upward, are the same shape as the man's penis and almost as long. As the two bodies fuse in an indeterminate space — the man appears to be behind the woman, but his genitals float flatly on top of the painting — it's hard to say who is penetrating whom.

Stylistically reminiscent of American folk art, Iannone's paintings also sug-

gest older sources: the writhing, entwined figures of Indian temples, the engorged genitalia from erotic Japanese woodblock prints and the ecstatic patterning of Byzantine mosaics. This last influence is evident in the 1983 painting "Welcome to My Art," in which two figures reach out to each other. One is male and upright with his genitals superimposed on his pants; the other, of indeterminate sex but presumably female, kneels and stretches up to him. Both are haloed in gold and red and encircled in bright blue rings dotted with yellow stars. The reference is unmistakable, giving the sexual relationship an explicitly spiritual air.

This worshipful attitude dates to Iannone's life-changing affair with the late German artist Dieter Roth, for whom she abruptly left her husband in 1967. Roth was Iannone's muse, and although there are few pieces in the show that date from the period of their relationship, his influence can be felt even in her most recent works.

Created over the last year, these small, freestanding tableaux depict movie characters involved in some kind of illicit romance or sexual affair. Iannone recounts the pertinent details in small, handwritten placards integrated into each piece. Her movie choices run from fairly recent blockbusters ("The Piano," "Brokeback Mountain") to classic or obscure titles ("Morocco," "The Eye of the Needle"). Filtering Iannone's particular obsession through a pop culture lens, the works possess little of the hedonistic intensity of the older pieces. Still, they are sty little celebrations of the inappropriate.

Speaking of which, the show's most striking work is "I Was Thinking of You III," a re-creation of a 1975 sculpture in which Iannone depicts herself masturbating. Her body and that of her lover are painted on a life-size box, subsumed in an ecstatic array of vibrant floral and geometric patterns. Where her head should be, Iannone has placed a black-and-white video of her face in the

throes of orgasm. The contrast between the harsh reality of the video and the flat, abstract beauty of the box's decoration makes her paintings seem all the more ceremonial. For it is ultimately their distance from the flesh and blood realities of love-making — even as they celebrate them — that keeps the works from descending into prurience. In this sense they are doubly liberated, providing a vision of female sexuality that is neither repressed nor exploited but radiantly alive.

Peres Projects, 2766 S. La Cienega Blvd., L.A., (310) 559-6100, through May 29. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.peresprojects.com

Victims of civil war in Lebanon

In his latest show at Walter Maciel Gallery, John Jurajj enacts a resurrection of sorts. His larger-than-life silkscreens of dead bodies from the Lebanese civil war are at once undeniably weighty and ineffably haunting. Executed in gunpowder-tinted ink on slabs of stainless steel, the works lean against the walls like tombstones that have yet to find their graves.

Taken from newspapers and other archival sources, the images depict isolated men, women and children — all civilians — photographed where they fell. Jurajj has turned the bodies upright as if willing them back to life, but they resist, appearing to float inertly in midair. He has also printed them in negative, which gives them an otherworldly glow.

The works are further activated by the viewer's presence — the steel is polished to a mirror finish so you can see your distorted reflection alongside each victim. It's a discomfiting experience to see yourself so sheepishly alive among ghosts.

The silkscreens are accompanied by a few small sculptures of luggage and a digital video. Cast in a mix of gunpowder and plaster, the



DOROTHY IANNONE: "Brokeback Mountain — The Sweetness,"



JOHN JURAJJ: An installation view of the artist's exhibition at Walter Maciel Gallery.

luggage provides a mute physicality that the evanescent images cannot. In comparison, the video — images of war "heroes" that slowly dissolve in rays of harsh light — is more expected. It's the only animated thing in the room but

somehow feels less vital.

Walter Maciel Gallery, 2642 S. La Cienega Blvd., L.A., (310) 839-1840, through May 15. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.waltermacielgallery.com

Group focuses on the desert

The small group show at JK Gallery, "Somewhere on a Desert Highway," treads familiar ground — the mythic yet fraught relationship between Los Angeles and the desert. Although it features just 12 works by six artists, it might have benefited from a tighter focus. But for the most part, it proceeds with a light touch, suggesting uncanny links between the landscape and the human body.

Melanie Schiff's "Bush," a black-and-white photograph of a clump of dry grass, bears not a passing resemblance to a part of the female anatomy colloquially referred to by the same name. A weathered wooden assemblage by John Outterbridge uses actual human hair in a modern-day version of a goddess or fertility icon. Not all of the works play off one another so well. It's not clear what Alexandra Grant's small bronze sculptures of the word "love" have to do with the desert. They are related to the city via Grant's involvement in the art-as-urban-revitalization effort, Watts House Project, but feel a bit tangential here.

The highlight of the show, however, is a 2006 video of [See Galleries, D15]