

Southern California

'Charm Offensive' at the Korean Cultural Center

The title for the group exhibition *Charm Offensive* was, according to curator Yong Soon Min in an accompanying essay, extracted from articles that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* this past summer. These articles discussed the unprecedented (in recent times) cordial meeting between North and South Korean leaders. The phrase referred to the radical departure from a hostile presence to the ingratiating posture recently assumed by North Korean diplomats as they court capitalist favors. She compares it to the adage "peace offensive," applied to the Soviet Union's initial, nubile movements toward détente. These points of reference having been clearly marked, Min leaps from international diplomatic maneuverings into art world politics to effectively link the two examples of beguilement by suggesting that Kantian pleasure (a much touted model response to an art encounter) is the result of a charming visual experience.

To further bedevil this telling title, the phrase charm offensive, like peace offensive, brings together two words with contradictory connotations. This formal device, termed "defamiliarization," is an effective poetic and visual strategy—ideally capturing and holding the attention of an audience. And, amazingly, the artists in this exhibition employ (each in their own way) the device to produce works that, as a result of this common ground, mesh almost seamlessly with the curatorial premise. An example would be Kim Abeles's re-presentation of two landscapes: *The Hunter* by Asher B. Durand and *The Canal* by Albert Ryder. This installation is a continuation of Abeles's *Smog Collectors* series. In this instance she has made stenciled copies of the original paintings and exposed these to smog for thirty days. The result, on uninitiated first take, is an experience of yes, *charming*, landscape paintings. However, as the narrative that drives the work is revealed, the offensive is divulged. These are wolves in sheep's clothing. The piece evolves into a stinging

dislosure of the disparity between romance and reality.

Kaucyila Brooke takes another tact. She shows mural-sized landscape photographs. The subject is Vermont Canyon in Griffith Park—an area that burned after a lightning strike in 1997. Brooke has for a year documented the explosive regrowth of vegetation fueled by an ensuing rainy El Niño season. The poetic intimacy and clarity of these seemingly straight recaps of reincarnating natural phenomena is belied by the title of the series: *Burned....* She, like Abeles, is charting the reciprocal connection between urbanity and the other by showing a seductive though tenuous natural beauty that, when carefully considered, gives way like a false floor to reveal a view of an animated sprawling grid of city growth.

Several of the artists in this exhibition use figurative visual stratagems to attract engagement with difficult issues. Steve Appleton's complex video presentation involves hidden cameras that film viewers' faces as they look at the show. He screens these images using a self-written program that sorts the portraits using a complex of 256 gray-scale tones and projects each in a grid. The visitor is initially charmed by a view of a colorful self-image appearing on the monitor but this pleasure quickly dissipates as issues of racial categorization and surveillance become apparent. Also using the soft asymmetry of flesh in contrast to the rigidity of a grid is Yong Sin. Tiny figures are arranged in a pattern across pan-

Mark Greenfield, *Mrs. Dah Point*, 2000, mixed media on paper, at the Korean Cultural Center, Los Angeles.



