

Seeking solace in another world

Themes of escape and fantasy unite 14 artists at Chinatown's Jail Gallery. The exhibit 'DREAM(land)' is a break from calamities and misfortune.

By JESSICA PORTNER
Special to The Times

A MASSIVE earthquake. A tropical cyclone. America at war as gasoline prices spike. In the contemporary world, misfortune on a colossal scale can sometimes seem unavoidable.

But for the next several weeks, at the aptly named Jail Gallery in Chinatown, a group of far-flung artists is offering an antidote to such calamities: escape.

For an exhibition titled "DREAM(land)," these artists — from cultural capitals as diverse as Miami and Reykjavik, Iceland — have created videos, sculptures and paintings that evoke otherworldly realms.

"Americans are looking outside the known world for solace," says Annie Wharton, the curator of the show, which runs through June 14.

An abstract painter and teacher, Wharton relocated from Miami to Los Angeles two years ago with her paint supplies and a cellphone loaded with art world contacts. When the Jail Gallery asked her to guest curate an exhibition 10 months ago, she says, she quickly compiled a list of 14 artists whom she admired, including one — Icelandic video artist Ingibjörg Birgisdóttir — whose work she had discovered on YouTube after seeing a video by Birgisdóttir of one of Wharton's favorite bands, múm. But only after selecting the bulk of the pieces for the show did Wharton realize what they had in common.

"This exhibit is about finding an ethereal thread in a war-riddled world," she says. "We have fantasies that carry us far away."

Recurring themes

Escapism and dreams are hardly new themes for artists. The director and chief curator of the galleries at Moore College of Art and Design in Philadelphia, Lorie Mertes, notes that they have reverberated throughout the art world for centuries. The 18th century English Romantic poet and painter William Blake created mystical verses and images of altered states that have inspired artists up to and including Bob Dylan and U2.

In the 1920s, René Magritte, Man Ray and their fellow Surrealists plumbed their dreams to fashion works with absurd juxtapositions that defy the rational. In the mid-20th century, American artist Joseph Cornell put dreams in a box, creating luminous assemblages filled with nostalgic objects such as soap bubble sets, tiny ballerinas and caged birds.

"Dreams are a visual manifestation of the psyche," says Mertes. "It's our way of dealing with the nightmare boogeyman and unfulfilled desires."

In "DREAM(land)," however, most of the works have a tension that resides somewhere between the discomfiting and the sublime. Birgisdóttir, for example, creates a reverie with a poignant undercurrent. The young artist's video collage, "Seven Sisters," is painstakingly constructed from hundreds of drawings on faded paper, old book pages,



Photographs by KEN HIVELEY Los Angeles Times

OZZING HEAD: Neal Rock's featureless busts are sculpted from liquid silicon rubber.



THE EXHIBITORS: Greg Kucera, left, Leigh Salgado, Joshua Levine, Neal Rock and Elizabeth Perikli are among the 14 artists with works in "DREAM(land)" at the Jail Gallery.

newspapers and postcards. In the three-minute piece, one sister has a volcano erupting from her skull, another's head sprouts bouquets of paper roses, and a third becomes encased in a stone castle.

Birgisdóttir says she was inspired by the story of the seven

daughters of Atlas, the mythical giant who held up the world. Her video shows the weight we give to our delicately constructed unconscious worlds, however fleeting they may be.

"When you're dreaming," she says, "you go from one sce-

nario to the next and to the next in a moment, without it seeming a bit peculiar."

Jiae Hwang and Nicholas C. Raftig III also construct a bridge to the unconscious in their video "Aperture." But their portal evokes a space age future, not a nostalgic past.



'CATASTROPHE COLLECTION': Greg Kucera's sculptures are miniature representations of deadly hurricanes.



'SHE LOST HER HEAD': Leigh Salgado's work raises questions.

'DREAM(land)'

Where: Jail Gallery, 965 N. Vignes St., #5A, L.A.

When: Noon to 6 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays

Ends: June 14

Contact: (213) 621-9567 or www.thejailgallery.com

In the three-minute loop accompanied by electronica is a silhouette of a woman standing at the edge of the ocean with her arms behind her head. Above her, a triangular obelisk ominously hangs over the waves like a UFO.

"When I look at the ocean, there's a sense of hope and loss, longing and waiting," says the Miami-based Hwang. "Everybody finds a time when they need to escape and look at the possibilities on the horizon."

In performance artist Jim Roche's "Flue Mask" video, by contrast, the Tallahassee, Fla.-based artist comments on how escapism has become a commodity. Wearing reflective sunglasses and an aluminum foil mask, he markets this crude contraption as a "foolproof flu-prevention kit" in a spoof of infomercials. (All four of the show's video artists were recently included in the "Video Revolutionaries" online exhibition co-organized by the Getty Research Institute and the J. Paul Getty Museum.)

Like Roche and Birgisdóttir, other "DREAM(land)" artists turn heads into metaphors for escaping reality, whether the craniums are faceless or morphing into plants.

Neal Rock's two featureless busts look as if they might ooze out of the gallery before the exhibition is over. Sculpted from liquid silicon rubber, one oversized blue-and-yellow head features black tendrils and ribbons made with cake-decorating nozzles. The heads could be outtakes from "Pan's Labyrinth," the 2006 movie that combined an exquisite fairy

tale with horror. Like Magritte's many paintings of faceless men with bowler hats or lovers shrouded in fabric, Rock's heads are cloaked from the world.

"In dreams, meanings are all jumbled up," says Rock, who recently moved his studio to Los Angeles from southern Wales.

Where Rock's pieces sound a retreat from the world, Leigh Salgado's work makes a lady-like exit. Her small paper cut-outs resemble expensive lingerie. But the figure that emerges from the serene haze of red and white lace is a girl in a halter top and frilly skirt with no head. The piece "She Lost Her Head" has an "Alice in Wonderland" fantasy quality.

"My work is about loss," says the Los Angeles-based Salgado, who used to work as an art therapist for children with behavioral disorders. Aping a mental health professional, she asks, "How did she lose her head? Did it explode? Did someone cut it off? Did she get obsessed with something and throw it overboard?"

Echoing Hollywood

The exhibition's theme of displacement melds well with the ethos of Hollywood, where creating opportunities to get out of one's head — at a spa or a movie or Disneyland — is a thriving industry. Wharton points to the current box-office behemoths "The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian" and "Iron Man" as evidence of the staying power of California dreaming.

But at Jail, some images remain stubbornly disturbing.

In his "Catastrophe Collection," Greg Kucera has created a world in which nasty weather is identified, cataloged and put in a box. Using U.S. naval satellite data, Kucera employs white Corian material to represent five Category-5 hurricanes: Francis, Katrina, Isabella, Henrietta and Rita. The stone-like swirls, each about the size of a soap dish, look at first glance like serene galaxies. But on closer inspection, they turn into miniature representations of these catastrophic natural disasters, which killed hundreds of Americans.

"I had some family in New Orleans during Katrina and was out of touch with people for six weeks," Kucera says. "But when you look at the satellite view of a catastrophe, they are exquisite and fascinating."

As for Joshua Levine's sculpture "Trophy Stand (SadlySitting2Ocular4AuditoryChimera)," it represents a fantasy animal that could exist only in dreams. A mix between a deer, a dog, a raccoon and a cow, the life-size epoxy-and-foam beast sits on a white rug in a cage in the center of the gallery. Its plaintive glass eyes seem to long for escape. You can almost hear it yelping for a way out.