

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS Scene

arts Scene APRIL 23-29, 2004



Family tied at the waist

THE SUBJECT IS MUCH MORE THAN JUST APRONS IN 'APRON CHRONICLES'

By Josef Woodard
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Visitors scurry about, but it's not just business-as-usual these days in the County Administration Building's lobby, aka the Channing Peake Gallery. Colorful strands of aprons, strung on clotheslines attached to the ceiling, change the feel of the place, denting its normally staid, officious air. The walls are lined with large color photographs of Americans from all over, many of them aproned in one way or another, who offer confessional words of wisdom and sentiment. Americana, it would seem, has come to roost.

ART REVIEW

But lest we write this off as a simple celebration of aprons and those who wear them and reflect back on them, this exhibition is much richer than a casual or cursory trivial pursuit. "Apron Chronicles: A Patchwork of American Recollections" is the fascinating, ongoing project jointly undertaken by journalist EllynAnne Geisel and photographer Kristina Loggia. It's an odd, but ultimately illuminating concept for a show/project, a blend of reportage, art and social anthropology.

The gallery itself becomes a "patchwork" of American life, as seen through crisp, colorful portraiture. Yet the show's complexity begins with the very root subject. Aprons are utilitarian, temporary, provisional garments, steeped in sentimental and personal lore. Unlike clothes worn as a public statement or shield, aprons tend to be domestic and protective, generally existing as emblems of a quieter world beyond cold worldly realities.

The shaggy-haired middle-aged Ronnie Crawford tells of his "Leave it to Beaver"-like upbringing in the 1950s and of now dealing with the care of his elderly mother in a nursing home. He sits on the day-ent of his tidy childhood home, holding an archival photo of his beloved mother. No apron is in sight, except symbolically.

Jean Latka stands in a large apron outside the posh Invanhoe Farms estate near Chicago, where she elaborately recalls a stern matron who ran the place during her youth: "Under Queenie's supreme rule, aprons worn at the dinner hour were immaculate, devoid of the spots and specks that echoed an existence too plebian to ever be seated at Invanhoe Farms." Linda Newman's saga is a lineage of sad abuses and upsets, but she emerged, healed by her new life as a masseuse, and her professional apron represents for her a regeneration of hope.

These unusually collaborative pieces are carefully and deliberately presented, in a uniform manner that is at once specific and universal. The texts contain highly personal insights and testimonials — with varying relevance to aprons, per se — from the subjects seen in Loggia's lucid portraits. But their geographical whereabouts are kept vague, and the first-person flow of the texts internalizes the human interest story aspect rather than turning them into journalistic case studies.

Despite the uniformity of the presentation, different elements leap out for attention from piece to piece. Mary Hovis' entry, for instance, is pleasant and homey enough, replete with recipes and a generosity of spirit.

However, what grabs us is the photograph, a veritable study in shades of gold — her exercise bicycle, her skin tone and hair color, jewelry and finally, the rippling gold drapes behind her, like something you'd find in a baptismal holding area. It's one of the most visually startling images in the room.

Other images speak volumes on their own visual terms, including the warm-toned and charismatic portrait of Ada Ashcroft relaxing diagonally in her



kitchen. Her proudly-worn apron contains yellow and red patterns mirrors touches of the décor in the room, an uncanny case of a woman integrated with the feng shui of her domain.

Cowboy life, in a father-and-son shot, asserts itself in the piece with reminiscences by Paul Schultz. He writes: "I never knew Grandad — two weeks after I was born, he was taken into eternity, but I did have a considerable relationship with

his horseshoeing apron."

The object itself becomes a prized and functional heirloom.

Santa Barbara's own Frank Frost, the academician-politician-jazz pianist and sometime charity chef is seen in an apron bearing the name of famed French chef Paul Becuse, whose restaurant is near Lyons. A young waitress, Anjanette Cirulb, dons a red apron and a ready-to-serve expression. But the real punchline is the backdrop in the frame, a large and vivid poster of the nocturnal New York City skyline, replete with the now-defunct Twin Towers.

Emily Prager is seen in a full-length model apron, standing with lost-in-thought, averted eyes, before a white apartment door. Her entry is unusually reflective on the potential meanings of apron culture, concluding that "the 21st century is about disposability, not preservation and invulnerability, so there is no need for protection. But human life requires aprons and if someday, there are no more being made, I will make one myself."

A passionate apron wearer has spoken, and eloquently.

APRON CHRONICLES: A Patchwork of American Recollections

When: Through May 6

Where: Channing Peake Gallery, 105 E. Anapamu St.

Gallery hours: 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday

Information: 568-3990



COURTESY PHOTOS

Works by Emily Prager, bottom, and Ada Ashcroft are included in the "Apron Chronicles" exhibit.

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