

AROUND THE GALLERIES



CHRISTOPHER RUSSELL, *Acuna-Hansen Gallery*
INTERIOR DECORATING: A detail of Christopher Russell's full-scale installation "Together," which includes eccentrically shaped curtains and altered photographs, at Acuna-Hansen Gallery.

A room of glorious gloom

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
Times Staff Writer

There are artists who also write, and then there are writers who also make art. Christopher Russell is among the latter.

With an underground reputation based on a clever 'zine called "Bedwetter," which he published for several years, Russell showed a small group of seemingly casual photographs in the back room at Acuna-Hansen Gallery in 2005. They hummed with melancholic strangeness.

A recently completed novel is the incentive for a new body of work, dubbed "Together," which comprises a full-scale installation in the gallery's front room. Featuring reading tables, photo albums, artist's books and altered photographs with graffiti-like designs scratched with blades, it does not disappoint.

The windows and door of the gallery's storefront space have been draped with eccentrically shaped curtains, pieced together from heavy afghans crocheted from brightly colored yarn. This burst of homemade chromatic splendor and warmth, backlit by effulgent sunshine like Grandma's version of high church stained glass, is disturbingly askew.

Crocheting requires a straightforward ability to follow a repetitive pattern. One stitch and loop follows another, with colored yarns carefully ordered. Those are the rules of the road, which these disheveled curtains only partly follow.

Russell's irregular, tattered piecing of the afghan fragments defies ordered logic, looking more like what's left by the ravages of time. The transformation of blankets into drapery isn't exactly customary, either. Whether fabricated by the artist, found in thrift shops or perhaps a combination of both, these peculiar window works are at once playful, smart and just a little bit scary.

And they resound against what's on the floor at the opposite end of the room, where two large black-and-white photographs in dun-colored ornamental frames lean against the wall. Each shows the front porch of a lower-middle-class home. One has a security screen front door and, incongruously, a black tarpaulin stuffed behind the steel bars to cover up the front window. The door and tarp are domestic barricades, but they could just as well be keeping someone in as keeping someone out.

The other house is a duplex. Though the left side appears perfectly normal, the right side has a screen door jam-packed with what appears to be several weeks' worth of delivered mail. Is no one home? Or is someone not answering the mundane entreaties of the outside world? And what do the neighbors think?

Are there neighbors?
 Russell's imagery kick-starts an open-ended narrative featuring an inevitably rocky path. A sense of essential self-protection wrestles with irrational paranoia, all in the stew of a lonely quest for connection. Elsewhere, an uncanny gray-brown photograph showing only dried oak leaves scattered across a dark stain on concrete pavement makes you want to rush home to take a shower. Russell's deceptively simple works display his knack for infusing complex, often contradictory sensations into otherwise bland imagery.

Near the entry, Victorian wallpaper in a peacock-feather pattern turns out to be composed

from text in Russell's novel. (A gallery handout says the book concerns a pair of serial killers. Natch.) On it hangs a large, elegant, silver-framed photograph showing close-up bits of dried grass peeking through what could be shards of glass or sheets of ice. The peacock-feathers' whiff of *fin de siècle* decadence deflates like a lead balloon.

The work's pervasive sense of over-cultivation is appropriate to our hothouse era of extravagantly art-schooled culture. It also has a long if sporadic history in Modern art, reaching back to the decadent, reclusive aestheticism of Huysmans' "Against Nature" (or "Against the Grain") and Oscar Wilde's "The Picture of Dorian Gray." More recent inspirations for Russell's aesthetic would include the abject art of Mike Kelley and the desolate suburban writing of Dennis Cooper. His rapturous sense of gloom is distinctive, however, and keeps this odd work compelling.

Acuna-Hansen Gallery, 427 Bernard St., Chinatown, (323) 441-1624, through Saturday. www.ahgallery.com

Hero or villain?

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