Renaissance Banjo Man

Comedian/actor/writer/musician/art enthusiast/possible closet nuclear physicist
Steve Martin and his trusty banjo grace The Granada
The Importance of Backstory

In the intriguing new group show 'Stranger Than Fiction' at SBMA, we find work that freely cross-references other artists and art forms.

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It might be possible to breathe casually through 'Stranger Than Fiction': Narrative in Works by Selected Contemporary Artists,' the new Santa Barbara Museum of Art exhibition, and gain purely visual pleasure from the diversity of styles and visual stimuli. But be advised: More time and close scrutiny will be rewarding.

The show, which opened last week and ends Sunday, Jan. 17, has a strong intellectual component and, yes, wall text, matter. Art for art's sake will have to wait for another time.

In this art, much of it by younger artists based in Southern California, allusions to other art — literature, film, popular music, and factors outside the immediate results before us — are part of a critical backstory.

An intriguing glimpse at new, shamelessly narrative art is a cornerstone exhibition of SBMA's annual harvest: five exhibits under the rubric "Refurbishing America." The shows are all tethered to American-rooted themes, in a no-necessarily-patriotic but also not unnecessarily angry way.

It could be aribler generalization, but it seems as if a core theme in "Stranger Than Fiction" has to do with the neurotic cross-referencing of both high and low cultures, as a reflexive habit in the American grain. It's something in our cultural DNA, a tug-of-war, a paradigm of combining both passion and disdain for Old World values and elitism.

Sometimes in show, the lines of reference run extra thick, as in Allison Scholnik's imposingly large but visually stimulating "Monkey Hobo." His palpably thick layers of paint on a palette, icy-like surface split off the subject of Michael Schumacher's pet chimp Bubbles, but immortalized by the bland neo-pop art of Jeff Koons, Joan Spora's similarly thick, iridescent paintings take clever aim at sources as disparate as Italian painter Giorgio de Baudoso, Jasper Johns (in response to the 1960s "Flag") and filmmaker Piero Pasolini, with his infamous celebration of gayydecadence, 'Il Decameron.'

Fihn, that great talent among artistic and media from the early 20th century onward, keeps slipping into the mix, but in surprising ways. Dawo Cemens wins the prize for largest piece, but with the dizzy panoramic drawings of an interior, like a map of a large, labor-intensive island, it is the tawdry Joan Crawford film "Sudden Fear." It uses multiple angles to disorient the viewer, while paying homage to the film's weapon, cinematography (Charles Lang, Jr., was cinematographer for the film.)

Fittingly, the collage medium is given nominally sacrilegious — theme with his crisply rendered yet willfully hallucinogenic graphite pieces. In the calm form of his drawings, Betz creates a woolly mesh of plant life, irreverent to Christian imagery of Christ fallen drunk in the spirit and as the looming nude martyr. Bringing it all back home, he fragments scenes from the Santa Ynez Valley. Ironically, the simplest image in the room is the large painting of a slightly distorted couple, in Noah Davis' "Boil and Margarita." But that artistic trick thickness once we learn of the artist's point of reference, the late writer Richard Brautigan's deliciously surreal and hypnagogical novella "In Watermelon Sugar." Suddenly, armed with that knowledge, the otherwise murky painting takes on a richer meaning.

In short, the references run long in this show, giving us much to ponder about what lies beneath the surface. Then again, such is the dizzyingly multi-layered nature of life in American culture. Stranger than fiction, indeed.