

VISUAL: Gallery shows dive into politics**INTERNATIONAL: Bookplate art a good contrast to mixed media.**

By DAWNELL SMITH

Anchorage Daily News

(Published: June 8, 2006)

This month's two exhibits at the International Gallery of Contemporary Art differ in substance and execution yet circle contemporary politics with painstaking acuity.

The video installation by Shoshana Brand of Los Angeles, "Show Me the Water," conjures up the sea without getting wet, as if positing the ocean as a metaphor for loss rather than inspiration. Through video, photographs and mixed-media work, the show suggests a primal longing for sand and surf but offers only poetry and urban imagery as nourishment.

Brand's video loop begins with a man reading a poem -- "The sea is blue, so blue..." -- and moves through the whitewashed hues of an urban setting. As the dirge continues from reader to reader, poem to poem, language to language, the grainy and melancholy cityscape commands the eye -- clusters of telephone wires and apartment buildings, metal roofs and stone walls, traffic cones and work trucks, news racks and hard hats, grocery bags and briefcases.

Birds chatter, and traffic noise mimics the sea at times, but the ocean seems more a lost lover than a companion. Brand certainly fulfills one of the goals listed on her artist statement: to show how the method of documentation of nature has taken the place of the experience of nature itself.

This works especially well in the video and the floor installation, a grid of more than 300 standard-size photographs of sand taped to the gallery's concrete floor. You can't dig your heels into this beach, but you can imagine it, maybe even remember it.

In the same vein, though less successfully, a mixed-media piece in the south gallery posits garden hose cuttings as tendrils of plant life curling out of a hanging pot. A fan blows against wind chimes nearby, a sense memory of the sea.

Through a trio of images, each different in medium, Brand poses a simple question: "Is this enough?" Her work never comes off as exotic or polished but instead concerns itself with the spare and worn appearances of urban blight and the dearth of nature in most people's lives. As such, the show manages to hold emotion and politics in balance through an airy, almost dreamy simplicity.

Indeed, Brand's show sustains a single mournful note when compared to the sometimes sweet, sometimes snide exhibit of bookplates in the adjoining gallery.

*Ex Libris*

Bookplate art by Susan Bybee, an undergraduate student in the University of Alaska Anchorage printmaking program, is part of the "Ex Libris" show at the International Gallery of Contemporary Art. ()