

AROUND THE GALLERIES



Sister

RECURRING IMAGE: *Skulls are found in most of the new Michael Lazarus works at Sister Gallery, including "Reverse."*

By DAVID PAGEL
Special to The Times

Into a void of inhuman beauty

Michael Lazarus' new paintings are potent little icons that look as if they could have been made by someone on a deserted island. Low-tech, cobbled together, intense and stripped back to basics, each carved and collaged work also looks as if it might have been made by an urbanite for whom mainstream culture is a bothersome distraction.

Lazarus' nine small pieces at Sister don't reassure viewers that life is rosy. They stare into the void and find it filled with inhuman beauty both frightening and fascinating.

Most include the silhouettes of skulls, often cut, like jack-o'-lanterns, from the small wood

panels on which Lazarus works. Spray-painted silhouettes of rib cages also appear, along with occasional silhouettes of birds, coiled snakes, a rat, a raised sword and a red monkey doing a handstand. The cut-out pictures Lazarus neatly glues to the surfaces of his well-organized works usually feature single textures and colors, such as blue feathers, green grass, blond hair or tan skin. Sometimes whole landscapes, urban and rural, are included, shot from such a distance that you must look closely to see the buildings and trees.

Lazarus weaves together these elements with bold, interlocking patterns and geometric shapes: spirals, diamonds, checkerboards, arcs and other forms. His palette is basic, mostly primary and secondary colors, set off with icy whites and midnight blacks.

His paintings recall works

made by outsiders. Neither precious nor fussy, they seem to have been urgently crafted, as if he had no time to spare and getting the job done was more important than hailing every detail. The handmade imperfections provide character and pathos.

Op Art from the 1960s stands behind the patterns Lazarus paints. But unlike much design-oriented art from the last decade, his is neither utopian nor optimistic. Think of it as Goth Op. The combination gives Lazarus' art its kick, which is swift and unforgiving, the work of a fatalist unwilling to sugar-coat things.

Sister, 437 Gin Ling Way, (213) 628-7000, through Oct. 7. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.sisterla.com