

Beyond the Surface: The Art of Nena Amsler

by Kerry Kugelman

Two white painted canvases hang from the wall, perforated by cut-out areas and surrounded by a disembodied glow of color. A cascade of scorch marks on another canvas becomes a cloud of shields -- or is it missiles? These are some of the paintings of Nena Amsler, a recent grad-

uate of the Claremont Graduate School of Art, whose exhibition, "Painting With Fire," at the Wild Iris bookstore in Claremont explored unusual aspects of painting and sculpture.

Working with a minimum of color, Amsler creates subtle and mysterious in-

terest by taking an unconventional approach to art making. Her works are never stretched on a frame, but hang from wooden supports on the wall. She often paints on the back side of the canvas, which is what gives work like *Invocación*, 1994, its haunting glow of color, caused by the colors bouncing off the wall itself: the painted color is never seen, only its reflection.

Cutting and burning through the canvas is another aspect of Amsler's non-traditional procedures. "The surface," she says, "is where conventional painting says we have to stop. I want to go beyond and behind the surface, to explore the new territory that opens up with this action." For Amsler, there is also a spiritual aspect to opening up the space behind the painting, a way to peek behind the veil what is usually seen. The canvas then functions not only as a surface, but as a sculptural material.

Amsler's work also references a feminist perspective, not only with her unconventional approach to painting, but through her use of mundane domestic items, like shoes or a clothes iron, as objects and tools. The iron shows up as

scorch marks and as a sculptural object in some pieces. It is made into an emblem of activity, with the power to even out or burn through material, as it does in *My Beautiful*, 1994, where the pattern of the iron becomes an abstract symbol that is grounded in the reality of the everyday.

Though much of Amsler's art addresses theoretical issues, her sense of visual refinement and balance gives the work an appeal that is often missing from conceptually-based work. These are beautiful objects that respect both craft and idea. Amsler's exploration of the metaphysics of painting is mentally stimulating and visually rewarding, letting us look past the surface of the painting to the possibilities beyond.

"Painting With Fire" by Nena Amsler closed May 31 at Wild Iris Bookstore, 143A Harvard Avenue, Claremont.