

SHARON BEN-TAL, WALLY HEDRICK

BY PETER FRANK

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Lustrous and sensual, Sharon Ben-Tal's new paintings manage to turn the banal into the mysterious. One series isolates and magnifies the decorative aspects of American paper money — the borders around the presidents' heads, the elaborations of the bills' corners — turning these Beaux-Arts filigrees into monumental chasms. Another series piles outline upon outline into puddles of erratic squiggle, challenging us to unravel them back into their more or less nameable components. And in a corner of the gallery sit two little cubes, each scored with a grid, each giving birth to a little cube cut from that grid. Both sculptures and paintings share Ben-Tal's formal logic: Images and objects evade our recognition (we're never sure what they are, have been or are meant to be) but not our cognition (we're sure they are, and mean, *something*).

The late Wally Hedrick, a mainstay of the Bay Area Beat scene, also tweaked our cerebra by showing us what we thought we knew and, in the process, making us unknow it. In his day this was a Pop Art trick, but in his late works Hedrick took the Pop approach a step further, elevating to the context of "art" the everyday of yesteryear. The paintings here, from the 1990s, incorporate images found in late-19th-century mail-order catalogs and other now eccentric-seeming sources. Hedrick presents his appropriations in a straightforward manner, transferring them in oil to canvas primed a parchmentlike gold (thus seemingly aged). But there is something unsettling about these old-timey keepsakes; we know the famously subversive Hedrick must have been up to something. Sure enough, an item pitching a stereopticon set documents "The Passing of the Indian," a grinning boy vaunts "Beaver Mouth Organs," and yet another antique ad offers the "O.J. Simpson Pruning Knife." *Sharon Ben-Tal at Bandini Art, 2635 S. Fairfax Ave., Culver City; Tues.-Sat., 11 a.m.-5 p.m.; thru Feb. 24. (310) 837-6230. Wally Hedrick at Michael Kohn, 8071 Beverly Blvd. L.A.; Tues.-Sat., 11 a.m.-5:30 p.m.; thru Feb. 28. (323) 658-8088.*

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