

SHAPES OF THINGS TO COME



R.B. Stevenson Gallery

Hilary Baker takes the panoramic approach in "Coldwater Canyon," one of a group of stylish paintings in her exhibition "Suburbia."

By Robert L. Pincus
ART CRITIC

Bright suburbs, big canvases

Flowers don't look at all natural in Hilary Baker's stylish paintings. Petals are streamlined, referencing machine gears as much as the forms that fill gardens.

That's because she isn't looking at the real thing as much as the way that mid-20th-century graphic designers pictured flowers.

But she isn't an archivist. Baker's paintings don't re-create sources; they make free use of them. Not coincidentally, the period of design her images evoke is that of her baby boomer youth in the San Fernando Valley. Her exhibition of new work, "Suburbia," at the R.B. Stevenson Gallery, is a kind of oblique autobiography, an homage to golden years for the American suburb.

In that spirit, the images are buoyantly diagrammatic. "Coldwater Canyon" and "Ventura Boulevard" are the show's centerpieces. The first is a panorama, with hills in red and yellow assuming straight-edge contours, and trees reduced to pictographic lollipops.

Yellow gets a lot of space in "Ventura Boulevard," too. It's a tall, slender painting depicting the street as if we were looking down on a planner's map. Baker then makes imaginative use of this device, turning the melange of architecture, street and landscaping into a rather elegant composition, with fruitful echoes of Mondrian, Precisionist Charles Sheeler and Stuart Davis' jazzy cityscapes.

By painting on Mylar, Baker lends her colors unusual tones; even the primary colors have a distinctive brightness. A collection of tiny paintings with proportionally large frames she dubs "Dingbats" are sensuous and calligraphic. In these, the straight edges of the suburban pictures give way to little ripples, flourishes and forms that are lush and seductive.

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