

The eyes have it

By Josef Woodard

NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

What, in fact, meets the eye in "What Meets the Eye," Hilary Baker's clever exhibition now at Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum, has less to do with the eye than the mind's eye. Through the artist's clever comic bookish reductivist approach to drawing forms and objects, she confronts our — and her — stubborn preconceptions in our reading of the shapes, symbols, textures and spatial relationship making up the perceived "real world." If, after considering her inventory of modular images, viewers find themselves slightly dizzy, the artist has done something right.

With this series of seemingly absurd but unflinching good-spirited paintings, Baker carefully shuffles a range of recurring imagery. Eyeballs, for one, appear as a prevalent leitmotif, relevant to the beholder and the beheld, in art and life.

As a visual, eyeballs also convey a certain ominous air of detachment, in more than one way. Aspects of surveillance, whether Orwellian or cosmic (God is watching), combine with the more literal and creepy impression of the detached orbs, which have been turned into elements of design, humor, and artworldliness. Pop culture references and a Magritte-like sense of flat, surreal juxtapositions keep poking their heads up in her work.

Eyeballs are casually stacked up at varying heights in the cheekily

titled "All Along the Watchtower," the Bob Dylan song made famous by Jimi Hendrix.

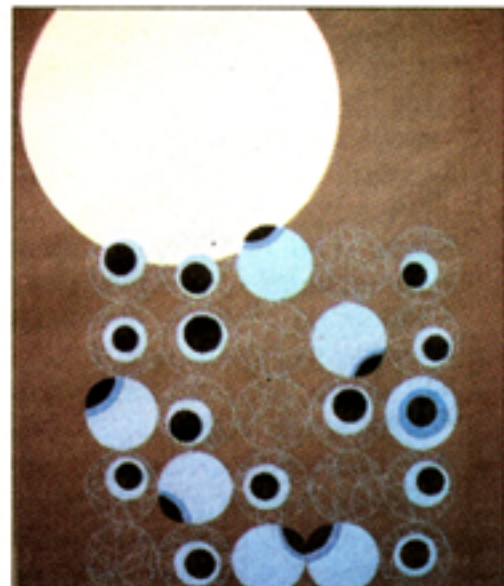
More eyeballs are to be found neatly piled under a pale, looming moon in "Heaven's Gate" (the title having more to do with the UFO-obsessed, sneaker-wearing suicidal sect than the Michael Cimino film, we suspect). They also make a cameo appearance in the large painting called "Tower," along with a crudely conical form and a thought bubble containing dripping paint rather than text. Apparently, the artist thinks in terms of paint.

For the most part, Baker's exhibition works as a set of interactive variations on themes and also as an odd twist on installation art, rather than as a collection of discrete, self-defining pieces. A smaller version of "Tower," for instance, can be found amongst a grouping of two dozen smaller paintings, organized like puzzle pieces on the largest wall in the otherwise compact Partridge Gallery.

The pint-sized "Tower," though, appears with a completely different color scheme assigned to each component part, compared to the larger painting. It's like a memory game sneakily armed with decoys.

On the wall of small paintings, eyeballs are ever-present, as well as another favored visual motif, brick surfaces. In this loony gathering of shapes, flat color planes, and real world echoes, we find peculiarly shaped chimney fragments, a monumental brick comfy chair, nuclear plant silos, and eyeball-like billiard balls.

For all the obvious levity of



"Heaven's Gate"

HILARY BAKER: What Meets the Eye

When: Through June 5

Where: Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum, upstairs in Paseo Nuevo

Gallery hours: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday; noon to 5 p.m. Sunday

Information: 966-5373

Baker's approach, these paintings also carry a sense of disquiet, as if she's trying to sort out the fragile relationship between the corporeal world and subjective consciousness. That's a lifelong pursuit. Though distinctive in its form and content, Baker's art can be reminiscent of Philip Guston's work. He, too, drew on grotesquely cartoony archetypes in paintings somehow both giddy and vaguely gloomy. Baker just does it with crisper lines and a brighter palette. A cockeyed grin slips sideways into a grimace. ■