

ART REVIEWS

A Dark Side to Children's 'Diaries'

By SUSAN KANDEL
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Unlike the halcyon visions pinned up along the sterile corridors of LAX—beneficent suns spilling yellow rays onto the smiling faces of children holding hands in front of houses lined with flowers—"Pages From the Diaries of Children," an installation produced by Susan Mogul at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, is one of the most troubling shows of the season.

Billed as a collaboration between Mogul and 24 students at El Sereno's ethnically diverse Multnomah Street School—ages 6-12, most of them gifted, several deaf—the installation includes a series of the children's drawings, 10 accordion-shaped books (each of which represents one child's autobiographical "diary"), and a 30-minute videotape recording Mogul's interactions with the students during an 11-week residency at their school.

Most of the imagery is disturbingly typical—a 7-year-old boy takes refuge from his family in a repellingly dirty room; a 6-year-old girl complains that she only spends two minutes of each day with her parents because "they're always talking to somebody else"; an 11-year-old girl depicts two sisters grabbing things from one another, the text beneath reverberating with the staccato chant: "MINE! MINE! IT'S MINE! ALL MINE!"

Yet some of the imagery is atypically disturbing. Howard Poon, age 10, sketches a man operating an electric chair, accompanied by the caption: "My parents want me to be an economical taxpayer, a lawyer, a doctor or an architect. I want to be a veterinarian. So I can kill all the dogs."

Brendan Walter, age 11, buries a picture of himself at the breakfast table beneath the following words: "I woke up and discovered that until school I was on the elemental plane of nothingness."

These images steadfastly resist our habitual—and dangerously comforting—sentimentalization of childhood. And for this, for her insistence upon these children's idiosyncratic responses (black humor, desperate rage, deadpan acceptance) to the often brute facts of their existence, Mogul is to be commended.

But at the same time, one wonders to what extent the child's vision has been filtered through the adult's eyes, agendas, and what is ultimately the adult's art. Why are all the drawings in the exhibition black and white? Is it because the children eschewed color, or because color might detract from Mogul's emphasis on language?



Jennifer Lange, 6, from "Pages From the Diaries of Children."

Why were discrete images recast as narrative cycles? Why were single details repeatedly extracted from multilayered pictures and magnified, thus awarding them unintentioned significance?

Mogul takes what is for her "raw" material and transforms it through a careful process of editing, recombining and recontextualizing. The real question, then, is one of exploitation: Whose ends does this process serve? The recent troubles of artist Tim Rollins, who received critical attention and financial reward during the '80s for his work with Kids of Survival (a group of his own South Bronx high school students), offers a cautionary tale about the risks—of varying magnitudes, to be sure—inherent in such "collaborative" projects.

Children are simultaneously patronized and privileged as the Other: they are weaker, but ironically less fearful; more innocent, but closer to truth; more centered upon habit, but less daunted by convention. Like the Surrealists, who "found" and then celebrated in their work a series of other Others—the woman, the madman—Mogul appears to be embracing/enframing an Other in order to discover something about herself.

It's a game, however, that at least in this case, seems destined to backfire. For in the din raised by the necessary questions surrounding this interesting but problematic work, it becomes next to impossible to determine who's framing whom.

■ Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, 1804 Industrial, (213) 624-5650. Closed Mondays and Tuesdays. Through Dec. 1.