



"A Demonstration of the Amazing Wonderland Self-Leveling Bench" by Nick Lamb.
PHOTO BY NICK LAMB

Sit, please

Art benches and Camp Fire reflections in two expressive MONCA group shows

One of the many remarkable works in the exhibit

Bench Press: Please Be Seated – Please, now showing in the Museum of Northern California Art (MONCA) in Chico, is a tiny hand-carved wood sculpture bearing the delightful title "A Demonstration of the Amazing Wonderland Self-Leveling Bench."

by
Robert Speer
robertspeer@
newsreview.com

Review:
Two exhibits: *Bench Press & Reflection and Hope*. Showing through Dec. 29.

Museum of Northern California Art
900 Esplanade
487-7272
monca.org

When I say it's tiny, I'm not kidding. It's only 4.8 centimeters high, 9.5 centimeters wide and 3.8 centimeters deep. And yet it presents a complex tableau, with a tiny walrus sitting on one end of a bench and a similarly diminutive man on the other end, both rendered in astonishing detail.

The sculptor, Nick Lamb, is a practitioner of *netsuke*, the Japanese art of miniature wood-carving. He's one of only a handful of American artists who work in this form, which is hugely popular in Japan. It's worth a visit to MONCA just to see this

extraordinary piece.

It's part of a deftly curated (by Redding artist Alice Porembski) exhibit built around the theme of benches—the many functions, symbolic and practical, they serve in our lives. Redding's Turtle Bay Exploration Park commissioned the exhibit, which is set for display there next year.

Many of the pieces tell stories. The barn-wood bench in Jude Fletcher's "What Remains," for example, has recently been the site of "a planned encounter ending in rejection." This unfortunate outcome is suggested by the uneaten sandwiches on one end and the bouquet of lilies on the other.

Or take Belinda Hanson's "Parking," for which the artist delved into her past, remembering the '67 Mustang of her teen years by building an installation

around the backseat of a vintage Mustang. To this she's added sound, in the form of pop tunes from the '60s looped over a drive-in-movie speaker. "A car parked becomes a kind of bench with privacy," she states. Indeed it does.

Bench Press is one of two interesting group exhibits now showing in the museum. The other is *Reflection and Hope: A Year Remembered*, a juried exhibit timed to coincide with the first anniversary of the Camp Fire. It opened on Nov. 7.

It would be hard to find two more dissimilar shows. *Bench Press* is an entertainment of sorts, one that explores the creativity a group of artists can bring to a common mundane subject. It's intriguing and clever and often very funny.

Reflection and Hope, in comparison, is an intensely emotional look back at the cataclysmic impacts produced by the Camp Fire and the other Northern California conflagrations of the past two years. It's also a look forward with hope for the future and admiration for the resilience of fire survivors.

Many of the pieces are painful to see: I think of Davis-based painter Bato Bostandzic's apocalyptic series "Post Paradise Hell," which the artist states "depicts grotesque human figures escaping the fire with horror and distress on their faces."

Other pieces find the beauty in fire. Michael Carr's three manipulated digital photos—"Suddenly Among Us," "Conflagration" and "Cataclysm"—are disturbingly beautiful in the intensity of their coloration. The same is true of Paula Schultz's two gorgeous, almost abstract photo portraits of fire, "Diverging" and "Entity."

Is it appropriate, one may ask, to create such beauty out of a horrific natural disaster? To which one must answer: It's absolutely appropriate. As these artists affirm, art is a healing force. □

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