

Smog doesn't block artist's scope, vision

ART: In a new exhibit of her work, Kim Abeles shows there's a lot more to her art than just showmanship.

By **MICHAEL ROGERS**
Special to the Register

If there's one good thing to say about the Los Angeles smog, it's that it has given Kim Abeles an international audience.

Three years ago, the Los Angeles-based artist began a smog-art series in which she basically placed stencils over transparent and opaque materials located on downtown rooftops. She let the smog particles accumulate over them for days, leaving intricate images once the stencils were lifted.

The art project, which she has duplicated for community and school groups, created a greater awareness of the area's smog problem and brought Abeles instant attention.

Now Abeles is the subject of a show at the Santa Monica Museum of Art that surveys her work since she graduated from the University of California, Irvine, in 1980 with a master's degree in fine arts. Smog art plays only a small part in the show, which reveals that Abeles is not only a highly prolific artist, but also an extremely versatile one.

The show, called "Kim Abeles: Encyclopedia Persona, A 15-Year Survey," consists of 82 objects representing 12 series of works, including strikingly imaginative kimonos and works concerning the Dead Sea Scrolls and St. Bernadette.

Abeles often is called a political artist who works in assemblage. She creates shrines, elaborate constructions, and other sculptures out of found objects, often altered to give new meaning. Sometimes she even makes objects look like they've been found.

There is a message in almost every work, whether it's on AIDS, aging or the environment.

Abeles is both a personal and public artist. Her latest piece is a table that serves as a repository of the most precious objects from her life, such as her uncle's Purple Heart from the Korean War and her baby bracelet. But she also has been involved in numerous public projects, such as the creation of an AIDS brochure that was funded by a grant from

'Kim Abeles: Encyclopedia Persona, A 15-Year Survey'

► **When:** through Dec. 5
► **Where:** Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2437 Main St., Santa Monica
► **Hours:** 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday; 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Friday and Saturday
► **How much:** \$4 suggested donation for adults.
► **Call:** (310) 399-0433

the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs.

She typically spends hours researching each piece, reading archival material, and writing to authorities for bits of information before she assembles the art.

"Her art has an encyclopedic quality," says Karen Moss, who curated the show for the museum. "She takes a number of subjects, does research, and gets to the nub of each subject."

Abeles is an artist who likes to share information. The exhibit includes a reading area where viewers can look at her notebooks and some of the source materials she has used to research each series. Even the catalog takes the form of an encyclopedia, resembling a World Book from the early 1960s. The multiple entries, biographies, numerous photographs and maps provide an original, informative, and entertaining guide to the show.

Although Abeles makes strong statements in her work, the politics never obscure the art. That's partly because the pieces she makes are interesting to look at for their craftsmanship and originality. Even the smog pieces, which make the strongest possible statement about our pollution problem, are well-designed and handsomely executed.

"A lot of social and political art becomes sloganeering," Moss says. "But with Abeles work, Moss notes: "Even though it's instructive, it's also poetic. You don't feel as if you've been hit over the head."

Abeles often deals with historical figures to address a contemporary subject, providing a distance that makes it easier to consider the underlying issue without bias.

In a work called "Other (In Memory of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg)," Abeles created a variation of an electric chair in



SMOG-PLATED: The artist's works, such as this piece, make strong statements about politics and pollution.

which the couple convicted of espionage in the 1950s were executed. Passport photos of members of minority groups are attached to the back and seat of the chair, creating the analogy that the Rosenbergs, as Jews belonging to Communist and anti-Fascist organizations, were persecuted because they were different.

"I always deal with subjects that are either overtly political or are tedious, typically presented to us in dry ways," Abeles says. "Art is a lovely opportunity to teach people things they can feel in their pores instead of head memorization of facts."

Unlike most political artists, Abeles is incredibly evenhanded. In fact, in one case she has incorporated criticisms of her work in the work itself. Along with her Dead Sea Scrolls series, which concerns the discovery of the ancient sacred scriptures, she includes a letter from a scholar challenging some of her facts.

"The idea of fact and fiction is interesting to me," says Abeles, sitting in a chair in an alley off the museum. "We want to know what the facts are, but they're never easy to come to."

Since 1980, she's lived in downtown Los Angeles, in recent years next to a factory belching toxic fumes. With her view of the San Gabriel Mountains usually



SAINTLY: Abeles' 'Traveling Sales,' a St. Bernadette memorial.



FOCUS: Artist Kim Abeles 'gets to the nub of each subject.'

obsured by smog, it wasn't long before she turned her frustrations into art. She has put stencils over a variety of objects, creating smog pictures of presidents on plates, images of body organs on science books, and even outlines of food on her daughter's high chair.

She also has emphasized the smog problem through a conceptual piece in which she walked in a straight line from downtown to the San Gabriels to see how far she'd have to go to get a clear view. The 16.5-mile journey under freeways, over barbed-wire fences and through backyards is documented by a piece in the show called "Instructions for Stride Forward," consisting of a photograph of Abeles, her pedometer from the walk, and the

day's air-quality report. "I was quite a mess when I got to the end," Abeles says. "I was cut, eaten by red ants, had brambles and thistles in my hair, and my glasses were broken."

Although Abeles addresses gloomy subjects, at the core of her work is a strong sense of hope. Her most recent piece, the table with personal mementos, is wrapped in enlarged copies of parking tickets, subpoenas and collection notices sent to her and friends; the table is also in the shape of a horseshoe.

"Even though people are broke, they still buy lottery tickets hoping they'll still make it," Abeles muses. "There's the sweet illusion that luck must be something that all of us have."