

Playing with views of reality

Artist: In her paintings, Linda Press moves space and perception to striking effect.

By SANDY ALEXANDER
SUN STAFF

In her paintings, Linda Press likes to play with reality, showing buildings and cityscapes made more interesting with multiple perspectives, bright colors and attention to texture and patterns.

"Like rearranging photographs on a table, I move space and perception around. ... The misconceptions from these patterns make the painting closer to 'reality' — an emotional, visceral reality," Press said in a written statement she uses to promote her work.

It is an approach that earned her a place in a prestigious French exhibition last month.

Press' oil painting, called *En Contraste* (*In Contrast*), was selected among thousands of entries for the three-centuries-old Salon des Artistes Francais exhibition in Paris. It uses a representational, but not strictly realistic, style to depict one section of 18th-century Mission San Xavier del Bar near Tucson, Ariz.

The painting shows an austere tower in the background and a heavily decorated, baroque-style roof decoration in the foreground.

Looking at one section of the building and then the other "is like you are moving in time," Press said in an interview. The Columbia resident enjoys exploring how many factors, such as the movement of the viewer or the changing light or the passage of time, also make people see the scene differently.

"I like the idea of involving the viewer by having things a little off," she said.



DAVID HOBBY : SUN STAFF

This painting by Columbia artist Linda Press, 'En Contraste,' was recently shown at an exhibition in Paris.



DAVID HOBBY : SUN STAFF

At work in her Columbia home studio, Linda Press studies a scene in Italy that she painted. Another of her paintings recently was selected for exhibition in the prestigious Salon des Artistes Francais in Paris.

Press, 59, said she loves architecture. Her paintings of houses in an Italian countryside hang along a white wall in her high-ceilinged living room, which has large windows at either end. Other rooms are also adorned with her paintings, in which buildings and cities are a common theme. Press said she enjoys the history and different styles of buildings, the geometric structure they lend to a painting and the contrast of shadows and light.

Travel is an important part of Press' artistic inspiration. She has gone to France, Italy and Spain as well as Mexico and the U.S. Southwest to seek out subjects. Recently, though, she has discovered the scenery at nearby Lake Elkhorn.

It is not only the views, but the "heightened awareness" of travel that make it a compelling experience, Press said. She likes to travel with a small watercolor set or with a sketchpad. That way she can capture her vision of a scene and not just the single perspective of a photograph.

"I was taken watching her in France and Spain," said Rebecca Bradford, director of Columbia Arts Center, who accompanied Press and other artists on two sister-city exchange trips. "It's like she captures the atmosphere, the essence of the life of a

place, not in exact detail but with colors and the scenery she chooses to paint."

Press created a number of watercolors and sketches while in France for the exhibition last month. She said it was "thrilling and humbling" to be considered among the best painters in the world. The salon was established in 1667 under Louis XIV, and over the centuries has included the work of Cezanne, Manet, Degas and Delacroix.

The experience led to an invitation from a French gallery to discuss a future show there.

"Impressionism, Italian Renaissance painting and abstract expressionism are the three big influences" in her work, Press said.

She enjoyed the work of Impressionists while she attended the High School of Music and Art in Manhattan, N.Y., often meeting friends at the Museum of Modern Art.

She attended Cornell University to study biochemistry, but switched her major to agricultural journalism. That allowed her to take numerous classes in the art department. By graduation, she realized her skills were best-suited to visual art. So, she pursued a master's degree in fine arts at Columbia University in New York, where

she focused on abstract expressionism — popular in that city at the time.

It was after she moved to Maryland in 1970 with her husband that she began to move to more representational painting.

In addition to raising two sons, she took classes in drawing and painting at Maryland Institute College of Art, focusing on "the basic realistic courses I felt I had lacked in my own education," she said.

Nature gives her something to react to, Press said. By painting from reality, she said, "I'm constantly being challenged."

"My favorite thing in the world is to be outside, painting," she said.

Painting became her career "because it was the only thing I was good at," Press said. "Now it is who I am. I am not happy if I'm not painting. It's a real need, like food."

Press shares her love of art by teaching at Howard Community College. She used to teach painting and drawing but found "it was too difficult to put on different hats" and to switch from teacher to artist.

However, for more than 20 years she has taught a class called "Art Museum Resources," which takes students to area museums to view exhibits and hear lectures about the works. "It is an eclectic art history class," Press said.