

ART REVIEW : Kim Abeles' Caustic Song of Bernadette : The artist-activist's incisive series on Bernadette of Lourdes is the strongest work in the Santa Monica Museum of Art's 15-year survey.

September 28, 1993 | CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT | TIMES ART CRITIC

In 1987, Kim Abeles began a body of work whose subject was St. Bernadette, the 14-year-old girl in the southern French village of Lourdes who believed that the Virgin Mary had miraculously appeared to her in a wooded grotto just outside town. Abeles made about a dozen mixed-media assemblages on the theme, including a souvenir dispensary for holy cards of the saint, each with a lock of hair attached. Some of the locks are blond, some brunette, some red or black.

Another souvenir-filled work Abeles made was a suitcase containing stacks of Bernadette postcards, grotto-shaped vials for holy water, small medallions and such. She fabricated a painting, almost six feet tall, that showed only a pair of lips and the tip of a nose, and she titled it "The World's Largest Painting (Section 32)," as if it were a mere fragment of a huge, 59-foot portrait of the pious girl. She painted a full portrait of Bernadette on a dried rosebud, and she placed a tiny portrait under a microscope so you could examine "The World's Smallest Painting."

Examining this series, which is included in "Kim Abeles: Encyclopedia Persona, a 15-Year Survey" at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, you never have the feeling Abeles is mocking the young peasant girl or the mystical experience she claimed to have had. Indeed, if anything there's a hint of identification to be felt between artist and subject.

It's not a sense of shared sanctity, certainly, but of an emotional comprehension. Abeles posits a conflicted condition of true faith mixed with social alienation, and of the way in which the mix can be swept up into a dizzying sideshow of mass consumption and commerce.

Principled commitment and vulgar freakishness coexist, both in Bernadette's holy story and in Abeles' aesthetic fabrications. In short, the St. Bernadette series isn't just a visual explication of the well-known tale of a young French girl, and of the way her spiritual rectitude has been entangled in webs of venality. Instead, it seems to be a pointed meditation on the nature of the art world in the late 1980s, when the series was made.

Bernadette's supernatural vision in 1858 roughly coincided with the early stirrings of European Modernism. Occurring as the modern world was being birthed, the Bible-school narrative can be interpreted as a conservative brake applied to the spasmodic, hurly-burly transformation of a traditional way of life. The event in Lourdes stands in almost perfect symmetry as a symbolic rebuke to that signal challenge long attributed to Gustave Courbet, the revolutionary

French Realist painter of the day: "Show me an angel, and I'll paint one!"

Abeles' series corresponds with the near-peak of the money-and-media-crazed art scene of the 1980s and might likewise be seen as a sharp rebuke. There's serious humor here: The holy cards featuring locks of hair show the saint wearing a kerchief on her head--not just because it was the typical mode of dress recorded in photographs of Bernadette, but because it implies she has been plucked bald in a ravenous pursuit of cash.

As a sly indictment of the inevitable corruption of purity and faith at the hands of consumer culture, Abeles' Bernadette series is as witty as most anything in Hogarth's incisive lacerations of 18th-Century British manners. It's also the strongest work in the Santa Monica Museum survey.

The exhibition, organized by curator Karen Moss as a project of the Fellows of Contemporary Art, an institutionally unaffiliated support group, presents nearly 80 sculptures and assemblages. The earliest dates from 1979, but most were made within the past decade. Abeles is prolific--she typically works in series, 12 of them surveyed in the show--and her densely articulated art often tends to be heavily didactic.

The encyclopedic quality of the exhibition, amusingly declared in an accompanying catalogue whose style and format is based on an old World Book Encyclopedia, seems in part designed to demonstrate (and contain) the broad range of her artistic subject matter. Her art has been directed at a variety of social issues, including the state executions of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, the AIDS pandemic, environmentalism (especially the dangers of smog) and more.