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Steve Turner Contemporary

PRIMARY COLORS: James Gobel's "Do We Speak or Are We Just Nodding Our Heads" is made from small pieces of felt fabric and yarn. He painted the glow on the lights.

Finding the softer side of burly men

By DAVID PAGEL
Special to The Times

James Gobel's big pictures of supersized guys have one foot firmly planted in the world of beefcake photography and the other in that of grandmotherly crafts — needlepoint, quilting, knitting and other hands-on activities that transform houses into homes by making a place for warm-and-fuzzy feelings.

The combination of gay hunks and homespun Americana is just the beginning of Gobel's smart, wide-ranging works. At Steve Turner Contemporary, the San Francisco artist presents beefy men as 250-pound cherubs: sweet, angelic creatures who have somehow fallen out of their mischievous places in religious paintings and landed in blue-collar bars, dime-a-dozen apartments and modest homes.

Down on Earth they hang out, whiling away their free time. Far from the spotlight of big-city fabulousness yet not free from the intoxicating glow of its intangible glamour, they seem to be suspended in a world between dreams and reality.

There's a heartening innocence to Gobel's vision. It's accompanied by a savvy sense of worldliness that is neither wide-eyed nor naive. And unlike biblical innocence, which is tainted when it is not segregated from life's seamy side, the innocence in these images is more forgiving, mysteriously fortified by the impure world to which it is tied.

In terms of materials, Gobel's works are collages. Each is made of hundreds if not thousands of little pieces of felt. All of these small swatches, in a rainbow of primary and secondary colors, are precisely cut and glued into place on often-mural-size canvases. Larger-than-life images take sharper-than-usual shape.

The clean contours and simplified forms of a kid's coloring book meet the coziness of hand-knit sweaters. The four figures in "Reel Your Heart In, Run Away With It" form a wall of flesh that is as meaty as a football team's front line and as demure as a roomful of wall-flowers.

A stickler for details, Gobel fills the gaps between his carefully cut pieces of felt with candy-colored lengths of yarn. Long, sinuous strands lead your eyes through his images as if following the traces left by a master draftsman. Shorter segments, laid out in taut patterns, deliver the visual kick of Op. Lowbrow luxuriousness awaits viewers who look closely, where Gobel's light touch makes yarn seem as if it is just

the thing for rendering wood grain, the filigree curlicues of flowery tattoos and the tiny stitches in sandals, not to mention eyebrows, buttonholes and the labels on whiskey bottles.

Gobel's enthusiasm for pattern is abundantly evident. In each of his eight new works, supersaturated checkerboards, vibrant stripes, jaunty argyles and high-keyed camouflages collide in an eye-popping extravaganza.

The crazy-quilt inclusiveness flies in the face of staid tastefulness and thumbs its nose at highbrow restraint.

Just to make sure that no one mistakes him for a purist — or a formalist, who is forever wedded to a single material — Gobel paints on his patiently crafted pictures. Using acrylics and spray paint, he turns flat monochrome fields of solid color into plump rosy cheeks, the glowing orbs of light around strings of Christmas bulbs and the flames of cigarette lighters.

Gobel may be a dreamer, but he's no pie-in-the-sky idealist. Pragmatism plays an important role in his wholesome, all-American art. Easier to make than tile mosaics or stained-glass windows, his pieced-together pictures of guys at leisure valorize manual activity as they serve up the satisfactions of a job well done as labor's own glorious reward.

Steve Turner Contemporary, 6026 Wilshire Blvd., L.A., (323) 931-3721, through Nov. 8. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.steveturnercontemporary.com.