

Kurt Steger, Indigo Som and Lowell Darling

at the Sonoma Museum of Visual Art

**Review by Frank Cebulski, contributing
editor to Artweek magazine.**

Steger's sculptures occupy the main gallery space and are by far the most interesting and engaging work in this exhibition. He categorizes his new mixed-media sculptures into two groups: those that are derived from a sense of "tension" of line, wire and string, and those based upon airplane wings covered with stretched paper and wax. Steger's craftsmanship and woodworking skills are phenomenal, and all of the pieces have the highly crafted and formal quality of finely made furniture and cabinetry. These woodworking skills go hand in hand with early model building, for the sculptures shaped like airplane wings, like Little Wing, and Wing and Vigorous Pod, have struts and forms overlaid with stretched paper and fiber that are reminiscent of model air-planes made of balsa. The sculptures derived from tension take shapes that look like musical instruments, like Ogatha, or Navigator, which looks like a primitive quadrant or fantastical astrolabe.

Two of my favorite pieces in this exhibition are Turning point and Mutual Fate. Turning Point is

an eight-foot tall standing structure that at first glance appears to be an African shield mounted on a black stump. But on closer examination the upper form turns out to be a highly stylized but accurate three-dimensional representation of a vulva and anus, with a brightly painted red oval at the top that looks like a lacerated clitoris. This work then becomes a statement about primitive initiation rites requiring body mutilation. Below this red area, Steger has used string to lace up the top of the vulva, like a suture. From this perspective, the large black base then becomes a black ominous phallus. The whole sculpture works in surprising formal harmony for such a "loaded" gruesome subject. The tension in this piece lies between the formalized elements of the elegant shapes, their richly textured painted surfaces and the brutal knowledge of what it really represents.

Mutual Fate uses a truncated wing shape as a basic starting point. Five rectangular compartments, like miniature rooms or windows traversing the wing, pierce this shape. In each compartment hangs a blue bundle, tied with string, like an onion or garlic cluster, each pendant giving definition to its space and place. The overall impression created is of a small boat or of an ideal, de-animalized Noah's ark. Steger succeeds in giving his sculptures that essential timeless quality that accompanies the pleasure and serenity of geometry and form. The textures of his sculptures are so tactile and obsessively rendered that it is nearly impossible not to reach out and stroke them.

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