

VISUAL ARTS

Umoja takes a fresh look at world art

By Elizabeth Marglin

Camera Visual Arts Critic

Umoja Gallery, opened by Kate Roberts in August 2004, has been going through a struggle to find its niche. At first it was a gallery devoted solely to showing South African artists, but now Umoja seems like it has hit its stride, with an eclectic hodgepodge of local, national and international artists. In the current show, "The Mechanics of Instinct," Roberts lets out all the stops, displaying the impressive breadth of her art acumen.

Roberts had worked as both an interior designer and a professional photographer when Hurricane Andrew struck Miami in 1992. The hurricane destroyed her home and all of her work and was the catalyst for her moving to South Africa with her husband, who had spent most of his life there. She worked as a photographer for several publications and books, meeting quite a few artists along the way. Intuitively drawn to Boulder, she decided to open a gallery on the Pearl Street Mall.

As a gallerist she delights in mixing it up, moving fluidly from superb African baskets to a polished portfolio of photographs that document remote islands in the Scottish Hebrides. It's a gallery that challenges viewers to widen their aesthetic horizons and open their minds to unfamiliar artists or media.

The baskets are a great example of this. Knowing nothing about the tradition of South African basket weaving, I can still appreciate Beauty Nxgongo's mastery of form. These are not your Pier 1 rustic-looking generic baskets. These are baskets as sculpture — incredible tapered shapes woven with striking zigzag motifs.

In fact, Zulu baskets traditionally were made for storing food or beer. Nxgongo probably elaborated upon an existing prototype, adding the element of a complex overall design to heighten the shape's visual impact.

Nxgongo is one of the premier basket weavers in the world. Her work is represented in all the major South African museums, as well as at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Expanding and re-



"Church at Howmore, South Uist, Hebrides," Josef Tornick.

defining the craft's traditions, she has brought the basket into the world of contemporary art.

In addition to baskets, Roberts is a big fan of photography, and the show reflects her interest in the medium. South African artist Obie Oberholzer pushes the envelope of photography to produce startling and strangely lyrical images. Another South African, Uschi Stuart, contributes several classic photos of the Namib Desert as well as a group of interior architectural images that have the expressiveness of painting.

Dane Spangler, a local landscape photographer, has several photo montages in the show, but his triptych "South Boulder Creek," with its sustained attention to the flow of water, is his most powerful. Rob Taylor has two small jewels in the show, one a close-up nature scene that invokes the spirit of Edward Weston. Taylor's platinum print process gives his work a unique patina and an amazing amount of detail.

The shining star of Roberts' accomplished photographer posse is Josef Tornick, whose portfolio "Tir a'Muhrain" has the timeless, epic quality of great photography. His portfolio, which can be seen as a box set at Umoja, will be hung in its entirety for the first time at Tornick's one-man show at

Denver's Camera Obscura Gallery in November.

Tornick works mainly in black and white, and his method of carbon ink printing brings out the velvety richness of the gray scale. Although Tornick is adept at portraits, his immense, solitary landscapes are the stuff of goose bumps.

Spots of good cheer in the painting department are the vibrant mixed-media works by Kristen-Lee Baillie. Baillie grew up in Australia and had a previous career as a ceramic artist. Her recent work references the abstract mapping of aboriginal art, but also draws upon a playful vision that is entirely her own. Baillie includes beads, buttons, textiles, paper and text from a host of countries she visited with her husband while en route to Colorado. Her sense of composition and color are unerring as she invokes the wild colors of foreign lands; these are paintings that make art a form of travel.

In the midst of such stimulating work, the only quibble is that the pieces in the show seem rather loosely related. Roberts definitely has an expansive sense of direction, but it could benefit from being kept under a slightly tighter rein.

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Kristen-Lee Baillie's "Lake Dahl."



A south African basket by Beauty Nxgongo.

IF YOU GO

WHAT • "The Mechanics of Instinct"
WHEN • Through July; hours, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Saturday, 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday
WHERE • Umoja Gallery, 1424 Pearl St., Boulder
ADMISSION • Free
CALL • (303) 444-0767