

AROUND THE GALLERIES

Horrors hidden in globs of paint

By DAVID PAGEL
Special to The Times

Jeni Spota paints like a cake decorator, spreading, swirling and daubing globs of viscous oils with spatulas and applicators to create undulating fields of creamy color and supersaturated deliciousness. You find yourself with your nose very close to the luxurious surfaces of her nine small paintings at "sister" before you notice that their writhing piles of paint describe horrors of biblical proportions.

That's when you realize that this Chicago-based painter tells tales like a lunatic visionary, mixing well-known stories with outlandish fantasies to concoct perverse dramas that can be neither believed (because they're flat-out preposterous) nor dismissed (because they contain too many grains of truth).

Spota's paintings cover 12-by-14-inch panels. Nearly all feature crucifixions, often of a Christ figure and sometimes of several rows of anonymous victims, their naked bodies hanging from long crossbeams. Other martyrs are burned alive over fiery woodpiles or cooked in cauldrons of boiling oil.

"Giotto's Dream, Holy Mountain (Symmetrical version)" depicts Christ in duplicate, his bent



JENI SPOTA/ARTIST

DIZZYING IMAGERY: In Jeni Spota's "Giotto's Dream, Dream of Constantine," showing at "sister" gallery, various groups surround an image of the crucified Christ, a motif in her works of oil.

legs, sagging torso and hanging head appearing to the left and right of the cross's upright. In "Giotto's Dream, Holy Mountain (Nightmare version)," the crucifixion takes place on an inverted mountain or in a hellish pit. Christ appears in the center, surrounded by more than 60 doppelgängers crowded around him as if reveling in Walpurgis Night ecstasy.

Choirs of angels and legions of nuns look on. In other images, cottages are festooned with

cryptic banners as villagers prepare for kinky festivities. Think Hieronymus Bosch meets Pieter Bruegel, with a good dose of Jess Collins and Alfred Jensen tossed in to make the mix even more dizzying.

Spota's inspiration goes back to Giotto, by way of Boccaccio, by way of Pasolini. She looks to a movie (Pasolini's "Decameron") based on a collection of stories that features a painter whose subject was the troubled relationship between humanity and

divinity. It's enough to make your head spin. And that's just what her paintings do, making you wonder where the storytelling stops and reality begins.

The results are volatile. And intoxicating. This 25-year-old painter's solo debut transforms what should be a sickly sweet stew — or overdose of distastefulness — into a fascinating phantasmagorical extravaganza.

"sister," 437 Gin Ling Way, L.A., (323) 638-2000, through Nov. 17. Closed Sundays through Tuesdays. www.sisterfa.com.

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