



ARTS & THEATER

'Last Words' among two poignant Julia Couzens art shows

BY VICTORIA DALKEY



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"Chanteuse" by Julia Couzens, mixed media, on view at JAYJAY. JAYJAY.

It's not surprising that Julia Couzens, a fine writer whose incisive art reviews appear occasionally in The Bee, should choose words as the foundation for "Last Words," her elegiac installation at the University Library Gallery at California State University, Sacramento.

Mixing drawing, painting, sculpture and craft, Couzens' meandering installation centers around the dying words of people, both well-known and anonymous. They range from Frederic Chopin's "The earth is suffocating ... swear to make them cut me open, so that I won't be buried alive" to an anonymous speaker's "Oh S__t."

Stitched, wrapped and suspended, the texts cast dramatic shadows and revolve erratically in air currents so that they are often difficult to decipher, causing the viewer, says Couzens, to slow down and enter into the work.

Some of the texts are inconsequential or funny ("Pour me a really big gin," "Don't eat the fish"), others baffling ("I didn't know there would be so much math").

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Many are poignant – “You need a haircut,” says a mother to her son. Others are joyful – “It’s so beautiful, so beautiful. It’s so beautiful,” says a dying artist.

Dedicated to the memory of her mother, Jean Little Couzens, whose last words to her daughter were “Why not?,” the exhibition evolved from Couzens’ use of needles and thread to stitch lines and marks into secondhand blankets, a process that seemed to suggest handwriting and led to a focus on words.

Made of commonplace materials (thread, fabric, blankets, crochet, pipe cleaners, papier-mâché, plastic bags, tape), the components of the installation blur the distinction between low and high art, becoming, Couzens says, “a sort of homegrown ... Arte Povera.”

Alternately whimsical and profound, theatrical and humble, sections of the installation are arranged like loosely connected stations for meditation or prayer. Two of the sections bearing the texts – “Uh-Huh!” and “I Can’t Breathe” – have a cinematic scale. Floating in front of floor-to-ceiling swathes of tulle in transparent yet saturated colors, they make you think of widescreen, technicolor movies.

As you move through “Last Words,” you become aware of the subliminal sound of a heartbeat that adds another layer of experience to the installation. Like the heartbeat, Couzens says, the installation is a continuous loop one can enter at any point to ponder texts that resonate with our own experiences of witnessing the last moments of loved ones.

A more playful, sometimes sexy, spirit imbues the work in Couzens’ two-person show with painter John Yoyogi Fortes at JAYJAY.

Her wall pieces range from intimately scaled, impudently erotic pieces like “Chanteuse” to “Coming Full Circle in August,” a gorgeous, large-scale piece that hearkens both to Couzens’ CSUS installation and large-scale abstract paintings she did in the late 1980s.

Shifting in tone from the glitzy, Mod “Barnabycarnaby” to the austere, haiku-like “Blanket Drawing #4” with its elegant Japanese aesthetic, Couzens’ ad hoc approach to art making and use of unconventional materials – a computer power cord, Christmas tree tinsel, wrinkled tissue paper once used to wrap Christmas ornaments – offer a lively counterpoint to “Last Words.”

I can’t say enough good things about Fortes’ paintings. From the quirky, Guston-like small paintings in the “Evolution Series,” among them one with a bare foot squashing a Casper-like ghost, to major works like the darkly exotic “Cry Me a River,” with its eery menace, and the wry humor of the enigmatically titled, “Me Club-Low Key Glorification,” Fortes gives us fresh, eccentric visions that reward extended viewing.

You won’t want to miss these shows.

‘Julia Couzens: Last Words, An Installation’

When: Through Dec. 15. 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday.

Where: University Library Gallery, California State University, [Sacramento, 6000 J St.](#)

Cost: Free.

Information: [916-278-4189](tel:916-278-4189)

‘Julia Couzens, John Yoyogi Fortes: New Work’

When: Through Oct. 28. 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday or by appointment.

Where: JAYJAY, [5524-B Elvas Ave.](#)

Cost: Free.

Information: [916-453-2998](tel:916-453-2998)