

Drawn to the **clever** side of art

Crowder and Stern take sly shots at domestic ideals and social life

By Fredric Koepfel

koepfel@commercialappeal.com

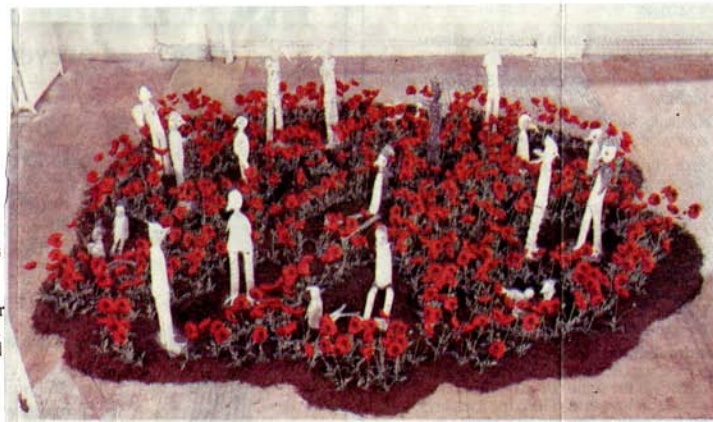
The work by Tim Crowder and Melissa Stern at David Lusk Gallery, vastly different in every respect, resonates with a satirical edge. Crowder's oil on board or paper paintings (with embroidery) take off on ideas about architectural comfort and domesticity, parody our ideals of house and home. Stern's installation, 24 clay humanoid bird figures (or bird-like humanoid figures) straying in a field of red poppies, skewers social interaction and pretensions with sly humor.

art review

**'Tim Crowder:
I Could Live
Here'**

**'Melissa Stern:
Birdland'**

At David Lusk
Gallery, 4540 Poplar
in Laurelwood,
through April 29.



"Birdland" by Melissa Stern

Melissa Stern's installation "Birdland" is clever, amusing and engaging, and that's about as far as it goes. Not that there's a thing wrong with being clever, amusing and engaging; those are exactly the qualities we demand from guests at a cocktail or dinner party, and that's the level at which we must assess "Birdland," which resembles, to a marked degree, a cocktail party (or art opening) attended by Stern's weird and amusing population of bird-people, an impressive sight because the standing figures are about 40 inches tall.

These, all 24 (available separately), the artist wittily and consistently invests with familiar personalities: The person who can't stop talking; the shy, sly one who clams up. The perplexed confronting the arrogant. Innocence versus experience; the foolish versus the wise; the austere versus the flirtatious; awkwardness versus elegance. All they need are martinis or glasses of white wine.

What is more intriguing about "Birdland" than the birds themselves is Stern's choice of the landscape in which they stand or sit, an expanse of dark earth that holds 600 red silk poppies. This distinctive flower, with its black center, symbolizes both remembrance and forgetting, the first because, starting after World War I, artificial poppies were worn to remember the heroism of those who died on the battlefield; the second because, as the source of opium, the poppy promotes forgetfulness, or as the melancholy Sir Thomas Browne wrote, "Oblivion blindly scattereth her poppy."

Of course the contrast between the white or graphite gray color of the bird-people and the vibrant crimson of the poppies heightens the pallor of the former and the vividness of the latter. And the subtle conjunction of memory and oblivion reminds us of the fragility and fallibility of all things human(oid) and bird-like.

And that's pretty clever.

— Fredric Koepfel, 529-2376