

By HOLLY MYERS

Special to The Times

Generational differences

"Decoys and Deconstructions," a thought-provoking group show at Overtones, assembles four female artists from two generations whose work explores "the relationships between power, abstraction, media and military violence." Although the artists seem more or less aligned in their politics, their approach differs significantly along generational lines.

The works of Nancy Buchanan and Martha Rosler, both of whom came of age as artists in the 1970s, are direct, unambiguous and intentionally hard-hitting. The works of the two younger artists, Hillary Mushkin and Mara De Luca, though physically larger, are far more subtle, in part as a result of the artists' deeper investment in the terms and strategies of abstraction.

Buchanan's "... AND BABIES?," made in 2003, is a video installation that ties disturbing footage of deformed fetuses preserved in a Vietnam hospital (victims of Agent Orange contamination) to the exposure of Gulf and Iraq war veterans to unhealthy levels of uranium. Rosler's "House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home," a 2004 series of digital photo montages, incorporates images from the Iraq war into domestic scenes drawn from advertisements and lifestyle magazines.

Mushkin's "The Sleep of Reason," a six-minute video projection combining footage of American fireworks, the bombing of Baghdad and various other light effects, is as quiet a meditation on the phenomenon of the explosion as you're likely to see. And De Luca's trio of 8-foot Colorfield paintings — one all black and two characterized by a stylized, explosion-like motif — makes the perfect companion: an elegant study in color, scale and visual impact.

These younger artists are clearly embracing political content, but using abstraction to create space around that content, allowing viewers to absorb it differently.

It's useful to see the two veins side by side because it puts into perspective the criticism one generation is prone to level at the other — that the former approach is didactic or dogmatic, the latter uncommitted or insubstantial.

Both are true to an extent — and not true. Each approach speaks to a different level of experience, and there is certainly room for both.

Overtones, 11306 Venice Blvd., Los Angeles, (310) 915-0346, through Dec. 16. Closed Sunday through Thursday. www.overtones.org