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The narrator is 11, his two buddies 12. It's an aimless summer day. The boys sit on the grass of the narrator's yard, smoking, scowling, searching for a vehicle for their preadolescent angst. Before long, they muster purpose out of the identification of a common enemy: Simpson, a boy their age whose chief crime is excessive freckles.

The snarling trio embarks on a mission to torture the poor scarlet-splotched kid. The boys find him at home, alone, bouncing a ball against his garage door. He has easy target written all over him, from the childish red and white stripes of his T-shirt to the slight whine in his voice and his pleading eyes. He's a quintessential innocent victim -- his victimhood a direct consequence of his innocence. Part of what makes the story told in J.J. Villard's short animated film, "Son of Satan," at Cirrus, so compelling is that ultimately, every character suffers from a sort of innocence or unknowing, however tough his veneer.

After the three taunt poor Simpson, accusing him of sexual crimes clearly beyond his imagination, they declare him guilty and sentence him to hanging. They carry out the punishment at the house of the narrator, whose conviction starts to tremble at the real harm he's inflicting. To save face among his friends, he stays tough. Simpson is a puffy wreck barely alive when finally cut down from the noose, and the narrator is steeped in fear and panic and defiance. When his father returns home and beats him for his misdeeds, we sense a cycle perpetuated, a wheel of misfortune being greased.

Villard graduated from CalArts recently with a degree in character animation. This is his first solo show in L.A., and it's deeply absorbing. The 12-minute film, inspired by an autobiographical Charles Bukowski story, has been shown and celebrated at various film festivals. It runs here in the company of dozens of the drawings that went into its making, as well as several sculptural installations.

Villard draws with a raw bravado that's a pitch-perfect match for the story. There's an intensity to the lines, the expressions, as if at every step he, and especially the characters, have something to prove. Most of the drawings are monochrome. Color is used selectively and forcefully, like a pungent spice. Villard strikes a visual tone somewhere between comic book and graphic novel, the emotional complexity of the tale lurking within the relative simplicity of its telling.

Shifts in scale and perspective are incorporated seamlessly, sweeping the viewer into the action, sometimes from the angle of perpetrator, sometimes victim, sometimes bystander. When the narrator bites his father's hand toward the end of the film, he appears a tiny kid chomping at oversized, disembodied authority, just what every child is developmentally programmed to do. It's hard not to see him, briefly, as the underdog. Earlier, though, when he's leading the charge against Simpson, we look at the quaking victim through the silhouetted figures of the gang, as if one of them -- not a comfortable position.

Villard is unafraid of ugliness. He exaggerates it to the point of the grotesque, so we can't help but get a good look. The sculptures, too, manifest the abject and abandoned. Like the film and drawings, they hinge on the intersection of innocence and violence, alienation, belonging and belief.

In the sculptures, Villard assembles common castoffs with child-size mannequins bearing animal heads. One goat-headed figure sits atop a stack of old trunks. Another pulls a little red wagon loaded with junk -- an old

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wooden school desk, a washboard, a statue of Mary and a few antique photographs. The edgy tightness of the film feels more diluted in the sculptures, but that may be, in part, because the sculptures don't have the benefit of a narrative to hang on. They're evocative, open-ended tableaux, difficult, kitschy and nostalgic at once. Villard's show is an auspicious and haunting debut.

Cirrus Gallery, 542 S. Alameda St., (213) 680-3473, www.cirrusgallery.com; through April 9. Closed Sunday and Monday.

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Moments that aren't so fleeting

The best of Gale Antokal's beautifully executed new drawings recall black-and-white snapshots. Not because they have a high degree of verisimilitude (largely, they don't), but because what drives them is a compulsion to grasp the fleeting moment. Like a photographer, Antokal overtly engages time, responding to life as a continuum of ephemeral moments and gestures. These moments, isolated as still images and standing in for a larger whole, have the potential for a kind of synecdochical power.

Many works in Antokal's show at Couturier realize that potential with grace. A group of drawings of birds is especially resonant. In each, the birds seem to have just scattered upward, speckling a pale sky with a flurry of upturned wings and blurred feathers. The birds are not in flight but in transition from earth to air. They hover and flap; their suspension feels palpable.

Passage and movement give these drawings a gorgeous vitality, but it's the tension between that continuous motion and the instinct to capture it, savor it, that gives the work such soul. Antokal defines her figures softly, with a bit of blur, true to the elusive quality of the moment.

Another series of drawings features people walking, toward us and away, often seen only from the waist or the knees down. Some bring to mind Harry Callahan's Chicago street pictures from the '40s and '50s, of individuals embraced by a collective urban anonymity. Others, though, hint of deeper loss and displacement. Antokal has explored Holocaust themes in earlier work, so it doesn't seem a stretch to suggest that some of these images, particularly those of groups of people carrying large bags and cases, might refer to the forced deportation of Jews.

Only a few of Antokal's drawings (one of a mountain range, another of a lone rower) feel static. The rest engage a sort of emotional motion, an ongoing processing of experience and memory. Her materials reinforce that. In addition to chalk and graphite, Antokal draws with flour and ash, flour evoking latency, ash conjuring ruin. She calls her show, "We Are So Lightly Here," but the images within it imprint deeply upon the mind.

Couturier Gallery, 166 N. La Brea Ave., (323) 933-5557, www.couturiergallery.com; through April 2. Closed Sunday and Monday.

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Portraying cultural facets of Brazil

In her artist's statement for the show "Tropicalia," at 626, Amie Potsic describes her ambivalence about Brazil, the subject of her photographs. Public celebrations there -- Carnival, chief among them -- are wonderfully vibrant and inclusive, she notes, but the country's underlying class, race and religious divisions trouble her.

If this dichotomy seems oversimplified, so do Potsic's photographs, which merely illustrate these two facets of the culture. There are pictures of colorful flags slicing across the blue sky during festivals, and there are images of walls and gates topped with a menacing fringe of glass to ward off intruders. Potsic, based in San Francisco, injects a drop of formal tension into the mix by composing along diagonal lines and using those strings of flags to make linear patterns against the intense blue of the sky. She also shoots up at buildings, which introduces a bit of dynamism into the compositions, but none of this goes very far to compensate for the slimness of her conceit. The pictures are attractive enough but unremarkable. They lack both the criticality and acuteness of vision to raise them above the level of nice travel pictures.

626 Gallery, 626A S. Spring St., (213) 614-8872, through April 9. Closed Sunday and Monday.

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Metaphors for spiritual journeys

Laura Lasworth is a painter of breathtaking technique. In her third solo show at Hunsaker/Schlesinger, she presents a group of paintings less obviously bound to literary sources than her earlier work. She remains true, however, to her abiding interest in the life of the spirit, states of faith and the human condition. Her images are gorgeous and pristine as ever, rich metaphors of journey, revelation, devotion.

"Mitten Tree" is typical in its distilled power. The lone tree grows out of smooth, gray-blue ground and stands against a pale sky that darkens around the edges to reinforce the iconic status of the central image. The tree's branches are smooth as human limbs, choreographed into a graceful, frozen ballet. Some of the gray limbs turn golden and deep rust as they spread, as if blood circulated only selectively through the tree's body. On a few limbs hang mittens, singly and in pairs, strung up like sneakers over telephone wires. The atmosphere isn't that of a prank but of something more symbolic, vaguely akin to the tradition in the African American South of placing

bottles on the ends of tree branches to catch spirits. There is a quiet sense of anticipation in the scene, of presence brought about by the enactment of ritual.

Most of Lasworth's paintings have that quality, every element within them of symbolic import, whether a lamb, bonnet or stormy sky. Only a few paintings are less than stunning. The rest are luminous prayers.

Hunsaker/Schlesinger Fine Art, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 828-1133, through April 2. Closed Sunday and Monday.

[Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO: URBAN ANONYMITY: Artist Gale Antokal used chalk, graphite, ash and flour on paper to create "Aornos 5."; PHOTOGRAPHER: Couturier Gallery; PHOTO: DISTILLED: "Mitten Tree" is included in Laura Lasworth's solo exhibition at Hunsaker/ Schlesinger.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Hunsaker/Schlesinger Fine Art; PHOTO: VISUAL TONE: An animation still from "Son of Satan" shows J.J. Villard's use of intense lines and selective color.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Cirrus Gallery

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