

# Clear on the conceptual

## UCD art chair mixes media to make a point

By Holly Johnson  
Bee Art Correspondent

Conrad Atkinson is an artist whose style and focus in the past 20 years have artfully dodged definition.

Hired as chair of the University of California, Davis, art department in July (in keeping with UCD's propensity for colorful, controversial faculty), Atkinson, 52, previously lived in London, traveling to other places for artist-in-residence engagements. A familiar name in New York and London art circles, he rejects the term "conceptual art" as a description of his work. The slight, soft-spoken Brit doesn't cotton to "political imagist," either, although both descriptions fit, you surmise, as you stroll through his current one-man show at the Richard L. Nelson Gallery on campus.

Here, language and images jockey for attention, as the artist applies the trappings of media and advertising in his own juxtapositions to give culture a plug. In one series, he has tinkered with the Wall Street Journal ("my favorite picture of our civilization"), altering the masthead to "Wall Street Alien" or "The Wall Dream Journal," and concocting his own headlines to move the focus from finance to artistic values. "Meaning of beauty under threat by multinationals," screams one. "Now that communism has collapsed, we can all concentrate on aesthetics," trumpets a second.

Commissioned by England's Guardian to create his own version of that newspaper's front page, Atkinson has also reinterpreted the Village Voice cover and the New York Newsday sports page in enlarged, fancifully illustrated versions.

His wry mock-ups put artists in the roles of politicians and news figures, and they draw our attention out of sheer confusion, at first, and then the light bulb goes on. The headline "Vermeer To Attend SALT Talks" associates the Dutch painter, long dead, with nuclear arms negotiations, and gives him contemporary clout. Another assures us "Artists safely back in galleries says chief of police." It alludes to the 1980s when the commercialization of fine art reached its peak.

Atkinson also takes sports, a Western obsession he feels has gotten out of hand, and spoofs the Super Bowl craze by placing incongruous statements on enlarged images of



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### ART REVIEW

#### Conrad Atkinson: Selected Works

Through March 12 at the Richard L. Nelson Gallery, 124 Art Building, University of California, Davis. Hours: noon to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, 2-5 p.m. Sunday. Closed for Presidents' Day Feb. 14-15. 752-8500.

football players, created as a public art project for a stadium in Glasgow. The jerseys read, "The search for a class and gender-free context obsesses me constantly" — and with more directness, "Artists are the unacknowledged footballers of the world." Couched in familiar images, Atkinson hopes his messages will blast home with the power of advertising.

"Conceptual art comes out of the academic tradition. I came out of the street culture," explained Atkinson during an interview at the UCD gallery on a rainy afternoon. Ironically, his works are included in permanent collections at the British Museum, that grand bastion of cultural authority, the Victoria and Albert Museum, London's Tate Gallery and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The Davis show is his first West Coast exhibition.

Atkinson's father was a coal miner in Cumbria, England, a working-class region rooted in the Industrial Revolution. Conditions that grew out of the industrial transformation inspired Charles Dickens, William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley and Emily Bronte to advocate social change, and At-

kinson looks to these figures for inspiration. In 1961, he attended the Liverpool College of Art when John Lennon was there. He remembers with fondness the renaissance of fashion, music and newfound attitudes that flowered in that northern city.

"We created our own culture — everything we did was new," he recalled. "John used to say 'I'm sick of all those tasteless people dictating all our tastes, and the people with no standards dictating all our standards.'" Atkinson is reputed to quote Lennon a lot.

Expected to work in the mines or the local nuclear power station, he hurdled the class barrier by graduating with honors from London's Royal Academy School in '65, and shortly after, posh Bond Street galleries wanted his paintings, which were influenced by the then-vogue American abstract school of art.

"The dealer said, 'Which should we take down to put yours up? The Paul Klees or the Picassos?' I was arrogant. I was 21. I thought this was the way it was, the young guys replacing the old guys — with the emphasis being on guys at the time."

But in the wave of 1960s political defiance, the up-and-coming artist swung back to his origins. In 1972, he heard about a thermometer factory in his hometown of Cleator Moor where women were striking because of mercury poisoning. He documented the whole event with video footage,

newspaper clips and other details on paper — the tools of the very media he has learned to deplore — and put together an exhibit at London's Institute of Contemporary Art, a stone's throw from No. 10 Downing Street.

The exhibit generated letters from artists in America, Australia and elsewhere, Atkinson said. "They asked 'Can we do this sort of thing?' I said, 'Yes, of course you can.'" Since then, he has courted his muse with an eye for issues. "It's difficult," he said, his Cumbria accent flattening a string of vowels in one go, "for the art world to realize that art is not the center of the cultural universe. The heroes of my works are not me, but a class of people."

Many of these works have evolved into research projects rather than traditional commissions, where the display becomes an integral, timely part of the issue at hand. This hasn't always thrilled the British government. In 1974, an exhibit examining both sides of the Northern Ireland conflict was banned in England. On display in Belfast, Northern Ireland, it included graffiti that stirred up such conflict that it had to be removed.

In 1992, he compared the hardships of immigrants in contemporary Northern England to those of immigrants in the mid-1800s in a project called "For Emily," part of which is on display at the Nelson. Here, Atkinson used visual ideas and phrases from Emily Bronte's novel "Wuthering Heights."

"He's a thinking artist, and he thinks very big," said Elizabeth Hess, senior critic at the Village Voice who has followed the careers of Atkinson and his wife, artist Margaret Harrison, who helped launch the activist art group Guerrilla Girls in New York. "They're really trying to change the meaning of art from something that's passive to something that's active." ♦