

VISUAL ARTS

A penny for her thoughts

Anne Connell's little oils recall catchpenny prints of long ago

By JOEL WEINSTEIN

Special writer, *The Oregonian*

In 18th-century London, printers made instructive broadsides called catchpenny prints. They were simple pictures with words, often depicting spectacular crimes, beloved figures from Shakespeare or animals en-

gaged in human behavior. This crude but vital form was a means of reading and learning for a populace that could not afford books.

Anne Connell's exquisite little oils at Butters Gallery provide us with a sort of catchpenny reading. Their flat, engraving-sharp images over floridly scripted mottos comprise wry and playful lessons, but they speak of philosophy and painting rather than limericks about characters such as *The Wonderful Pig of Knowledge*.

Unlike the woodcut-simple broadsides, Connell's scenes are richly

ART REVIEW

Anne Connell

WHERE: Butters Gallery

ADDRESS: 223 N.W. Ninth Ave.

HOURS: 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays

CLOSING: Feb. 27

ADMISSION: Free

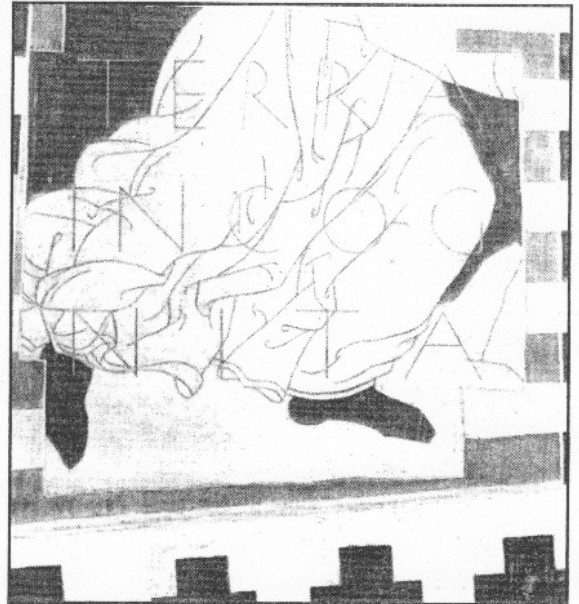
colored, often with patterned backgrounds from renaissance heraldry. The mottos, though plain to see, can be enigmatic, because they are sometimes in Latin or Italian.

In one piece, Connell offers an admonition that is a key to viewing this show: "*Ecce signum*," look at the evidence. But as in the painting, you have to look carefully. The piece consists simply of a field of color, at the top of which a small red hand points to the motto below. The evidence is all there, but it's hidden. The handsome motto is the same color as its background.

The thing to be discovered in "*Rapid Lessons in Abbreviated Drawing*" is more atmospheric. Inside a small, simple frame, a group of life-size dominoes sits so that we might be seeing them from above, laid end-to-end like in the game, or head-on, in an arrangement sustained by balance and gravity. Behind the dominoes is a divided rectangle made half of heraldic pattern, half of gold leaf on which the pattern is fading. Nearest to us, as if floating above — or in front of — the dominoes are several sketches in different hues: one of a rooster, one of a chicken, and two of a series of boxes that provide a method for learning to draw the birds. The title of the piece is also the title of a drawing textbook written in 1812 by a prominent Japanese illustrator.

Connell has turned quickness and ease into colorful rigor; simplicity into intriguing complication. The painting is a diagram of her restless imagination: curious, well-read, set free, perhaps, by the reverie of a game.

The painting "*Rigid Designator*" illustrates with considerable irony the position of an artist in late 20th



Anne Connell's "*Terra Incognita*" (1991) is oil and gold leaf on panel.

century, post-industrial America. The title refers to the philosophical term denoting words with only one meaning — and also, no doubt, to the painting's central image: a metric ruler across which is written "*ars longa, vita brevis*." The rule is an amazing reproduction of the machine-made thing, with meticulously placed divisions and numbers. It sits on a field that resembles a chalky blackboard adrift with the ghostly shadows of school binder grommets, a boat-form of red and white stripes, a prismatically colored bar, and — contrasting with the mechanical angularity of the ruler — several loosely sketched, classical-looking heads and limbs.

Connell is carefully and deliberately reproducing by hand what is usually mass-produced by a mindless industrial process is an act of subversive appropriation. Close examination of her mottos shows that she does this routinely: Her writing is not calligraphy; it mimics a typeface.

Physically, Connell's painting is as laborious and well-crafted as that of the classical artists whose work she admires and borrows freely from. She likes to layer pigment thickly and incise it with etching needles, giving her line a printlike exactness. Like the far less sophisti-

cated catchpenny prints, her compositions are arrestingly simple and balanced.

By itself, all this hard work would make Connell something of a cultural guerrilla in the age of commodified art. But her approach to appropriation is what gives her work its individuality and power.

There are three larger paintings in the show with images taken from a classical mural on the floor of a cathedral in Sienna, Italy. These pieces depict robes and sandaled feet floating in almost full-frame fields of white. Each central image is surrounded by lines or motifs that, as much as the hand will allow, are almost perfectly asymmetrical. Words overlay each scene — "*Vox clamantis in deserto*," "*Artes, scientia, veritas*," and "*Terra incognita*" — in letters that cross the fabric so they can be read only with great effort.

It's an effort that echoes the work of the paintings' making: the selection of pictorial fragments, the drawing and painting, the construction of letter forms and spacing of words, the careful distortion of borders.

Their flat whiteness makes these paintings as cold as the pavement they were borrowed from, and not nearly as likable as the smaller work. But, after all, these are homages to cool intellect: to curiosity, truth, outspokenness.