

Burton's five other paintings employ a more illusionistic tension between orbs of bright colors and diagonal grids. "Birth Bloom" is a 6-foot square canvas divided into colorful triangles that pair up to form diamonds; each contains, but is obscured by, a flat, black blob that initially appears to be a perfect circle, but then resembles the silhouette of a living cell just before it replicates. The overall effect is a jittery, all-over movement set up by the interactive lattice-work of the light-sucking black and the brilliant, underlying colors that bound forward from behind.

"Gold" intensifies this play between figure and ground--or foreground and background--by allowing some of the unpainted canvas to show through around the lines of the underlying grid. "Metabolism" adds another level by covering the structure of "Gold" with a layer of floating ovals.

Although these paintings represent a significant break from Burton's literal mimicry of art history's established forms, they still remain too constricted by modern abstraction's obsession with simple visual ambivalence, wholly within the parameters of figure-ground relationships. They suggest that any interrogation of painting must involve a more thorough exploration of its indebtedness to decoration and the role color plays in composition.

Since modern painting has generally been uncomfortable with these issues, this might provide an original way out of the formalist cul-de-sac from which Burton is currently struggling to escape.

** Daniel Weinberg Gallery, 2032 Broadway, Santa Monica, (310) 453-0180, through Jan. 4. Closed Sunday and Monday.*

Assault on the Senses: From its tunnel-like entrance--where each visitor must climb into a garbage bag and wade through a pool of dirty water--to its six dark chambers filled with crude images, oversize silhouettes made from cheap materials, eerie lights shining through plastic sheets and relentless cacophony of projected slides, audio tapes,

automatic garage-door openers and a messy pile of synchronized computer screens and printers, “Destination L.A.” assaults your senses.

Unlike most politically engaged art, this installation at LACE by San Diego’s Border Art Workshop doesn’t preach to the art world’s converted or even deliver any sort of unequivocal message. Accompanied by six continually running videos (and five performances that took place Dec. 20), it simply presents a condensed and intensified version of life as it criss-crosses the border between the U.S. and Mexico.

Rather than telling anyone what to think of the current, unworkable situation in which U.S. officialdom willingly exploits undocumented laborers while rejecting them as “illegal aliens,” “Destination L.A.” offers a theatricalized nightmare that grabs your attention more effectively than almost any work normally exhibited in galleries in this city.

If making art out of the misery of an uncounted population seems contradictory, this problem pales in comparison to the cruel contradictions that are an everyday reality for the people caught between two countries whose governmental hypocrisies collide on an arbitrary but devastating line somewhere between San Diego and Tijuana.

** Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, 1804 Industrial St., (213) 624-5650. Closed Mondays and Tuesdays.*

Singing of ‘Things’: A sort of blue-collar ethos gives many of Karl Matson’s sculptures their poignant kick. This no-nonsense directness, however, also threatens to swamp the effectiveness of his found and slightly altered objects.

The simple poetry of Matson’s immediately recognizable, mundane “things” at Meyers/Bloom Gallery sometimes gets lost in the shuffle from the everyday world of ordinary life to the rarefied realm of high art collectibles. Take “Clean House,” a roll of toilet paper and a plunger, respectively made from a coil of copper and cast brass and lead. What is meant to refer to life’s most basic processes--and the (almost universal)