

Meditations on modern mania

By **MARY LOUISE SCHUMACHER**
Journal Sentinel art critic

Annelisse Molini hasn't quite committed to the darkest, most existential aspects of her art yet — though she should.

She should dump the pretty flowers and embrace her strong point of view about the excesses, distractedness and incoherence of contemporary life. That's what's most potent in the "Dialogues and Diagrams . . . In Search of a Path" exhibit of her work at Latino Arts Inc.

That said, Molini's psychological exploration is relatively new and finding its own path, hence the exhibition title, she says. It was born from a fascination with architecture and what she calls a dry, literal research project.

Molini, who is from Puerto Rico and got her master's degree in architecture and urban planning at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 1991, was studying the architectural significance of churches in small Puerto Rican town squares a few years ago. That led her to consider the emotional place they held in society, she says.

These contemplative spaces, though traditionally jewel-like centerpieces of Puerto Rican towns, had lost much of their relevance. Molini attributes this, in large part, to the frenetic pace of contemporary life.

Architectural language was simply insufficient to describe that cultural change, so Molini returned to an earlier love: painting.

Much like Hieronymus Bosch's apocalyptic scenes of creatures spilling into hell or rising to salvation, many of Molini's epic cosmologies provoke us to locate ourselves within a spiritual spectrum.

The scene in "Usted esta aqui o tal vez aqui" ("Are you here or perhaps here?") throbs with the energy of human endeavor. Tiny humans and cars thread through a strange underground and ruined cityscape like ants in an ant farm.

Artist's spiritual vision rooted in architecture

IF YOU GO

"Dialogues and Diagrams . . . In Search of a Path" will remain on view through March 28 at Latino Arts Inc., 1028 S. 9th St. The gallery is open from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Friday. Information: www.latinoartsinc.org or (414) 384-3100.

And like the chaotic chambers in Giovanni Battista Piranesi's (another architect-turned-artist) 18th-century prisons, with their drawbridges and tunnels to nowhere, there is a dark pointlessness to the place.

Impossibly high ladders are propped against giant ruins, including a mostly demolished church, in the scene. A furnace-like glow burns from the doors and windows. Blue seems to bleed from the sky, dripping right from the canvas like acid.

Staircases, roads, telephone wires, radio antennas, scaffoldings and roller coasters are painted in a tangle of crisp, white lines and — like Lilliputian ropes holding down a giant — seem to restrain the dark, earthen-hued landscape.

It is a makeshift civilization knit atop a ruined one — a symbolic representation of the multiple tracks we traverse and try to keep straight, Molini says.

"That's just how everyday life is," says Molini. "Today, in contemporary life, it's very fast.

"When you see things from the outside, you realize it is actually like this. You have so many things

going on but you don't realize it because you don't even have the time to think about it."

And it is that "seeing things from the outside" that's a big part of Molini's strength. The paintings that zero in more closely on specific scenes or figures, that don't seem to take a bird's eye view of space and time, are poignant but have less to say.

And she, like Piranesi, is adept at creating vast believable space, even when it's intended to be incoherent and fractured.

The churn of space is convincing, even, in the largely abstract "Vida Rosa," which is a giant swirl of colorful paint. The painting is reminiscent of many art historical depictions of Dante's Inferno. Threaded through it are many of Molini's recurring symbols of construction and reconstruction such as ladders and scaffolding.

Her tiny people, a step above stick figures in their simplicity and innocence, hang from strands of paint like clothes on a line. They are drawn like cartoons, with a child-like sweetness. Cute little flowers and cars are added in, too. This makes sense conceptually, in an artwork about blank minds and inattention. But the touch of preciousness is ultimately out of place, an unnecessary note of niceness in an otherwise sobering observation about the world.

Molini says her art is fundamentally about questioning. But she's reached a few salient conclusions, too, and should own up to them.

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To see more of Annelisse Molini's art and to hear her talk about it, go to Mary Louise Schumacher's blog, Art City: www.jsonline.com/links/artcity