DOVE BRADSHAW, JAN HENLE, EILEEN COWIN

Dove Bradshaw and Jan Henle both rely on nature for their culture, but Henle fixes what is in flux while Bradshaw reveals the flux in what seems fixed. Relying on Zen-inspired concepts of indeterminate form and process, Bradshaw sets in motion oxidizing interactions between mostly mineral substances. These present themselves as beautiful and even poignant, not simply for their vivid colors and dramatic display of change, but for the fragility they reveal in supposedly tough, obdurate objects such as stones as well as in fugitive things such as carbon paper. In many of her pieces, sculptural and painterly alike, Bradshaw employs the volatile substance called liver of sulfur (ammonium chloride to non-alchemists), whose sensitivity to light and humidity ironically perpetuates the instability of her materials. In the provocatively titled work Passion, however, it's the regular application of a mild acid to a copper plaque embedded in the wall that provokes chemical reaction — a thin greenish stain that streams down the wall like a veil of tears.

If Bradshaw's domain is the mineral, Jan Henle's is the vegetable. Henle's photographs, monochromatic fields flecked with lighter tones, are of hoed but not tilled fields, red clay soil turned over and engulfing all remaining vestiges of plant life. As a result, luscious cascades of bronze-red dirt fill the picture frame. These are not landscapes; no sky, horizon line, or any sign of living thing or structure interrupts the view into the ground. This basic image pertains throughout Henle's photographs, but, of course, such fixity belies the changeability of the subject matter.

The photo-composites and one video projection constituting Eileen Cowin's spare installation Returning to Ordinary Life contrast images of stillness and eternity — a motionless woman seen from behind, for instance, or a view of the ocean marked only by a horizon line — with people's gestures, urban bustle and the interruption of speech. The voice-overs in the projected video express a string of wishes, but wishes of the most mundane kind: "I do wish the check would go directly to me," "Wish me luck." The still sequences are marked with pungent, somewhat judgmental or prescriptive phrases — "You have a yearning for perfection," "Don't be overly suspicious where it's not warranted." Cowin is no photographic Jenny Holzer, however; it is clear her dicta are part of a larger narrative thrust (not quite a project), and it turns out that the Grim Brothers fairy tales are the spiritual and expository models for Cowin's elliptical statements. But the coupling of these statements with her enigmatic views of ordinary people and situations moves way beyond 19th-century moralizing.

Dave Bradshaw and Jan Henle at the Museum of Contemporary Art; Eileen Cowin at the University Art Museum, Cal State Long Beach; all thru Oct. 25.

—Peter Frank

Recommended gallery shows: Ashley Collins at Soolip; Anthony Hernandez at Den Bernier; Larry Fink at Jan Kesner; Lee Friedlander at Paul Kopeikin; Tony DeLap and Mark di Suvero at Mark Moore; Bari Kumar and Steve Schmidt at Patricia Correa; Katherine Change Liu at Gail Harvey; Technical Poetics at Sherry Frumkin.