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'Sentimental Education'

by Holland Cotter
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There are always a few hot summertime group shows that don't make the living feel easy, and "Sentimental Education," organized by the art critic David Rimanelli, is one of this season's best.

The title is from Flaubert's notably un sentimental 1870 novel about a good-looking ninny from Nowheresville who heads to Paris in search of a life - preferably the life of an artist - and staggers through some amorous adventures there before heading home, none the wiser.

Mr. Rimanelli, who lives in Los Angeles, asked his artists to read the book and respond to it. Some did and some didn't, but in any case the tone of the show is set by another novel,

Louis-Ferdinand Céline's 1960 "North," a scatological vaudevillian work here read aloud by the writer Gary Indiana in a film by John Boskovich.

Céline, an amazing prose stylist and a Nazi sympathizer, was lateen reading for some people (at 18 and in Paris in my case). And his gross-out visions of the world feel just about right for that age when one can have both a socially critical eye and a soft spot for louche glamour. The combination is shrewdly spelled out in a compare-and-contrast pairing of Jessica Craig-Martin's photos of disccated dames at a Bill Blass fashion event and Paterson Beckwith's shots of art world junior glitterati.

Youth- childhood and adolescence- is a recurrent theme. Alex Bag collaborates with Ethan Kramer on a pathogenic version of "Sesame Street" using pepper viruses. Rob Pruitt brings his cute, glitter-

covered pandas. Hanna Greely, one of several promising California artists making New York debuts, offers a life-size clay sculpture of man's best friend with lots of extra legs.

Here and there, Flaubert is referred to directly. Jonathan Hammer creates fancy leather covers for "Sentimental Education" modeled on high school yearbooks and embossed with the names of art schools. And Deb Lacusta, in a video, deftly writes out snippets of purple-prose dialogue ("I am crazy with desire," "Love has made me a happy victim") with her toes.

There is good painting. Two detailed still lives by Delia Brown include casual jumbles of drugs, money and books, including Flaubert and French theory. Daria Martin contributes barely-there pencil drawings, and a double video titled "Shangri-LA," one each of a nude, androgynous young man and woman lying under perpetual showers of fake falling leaves.

Ms. Martins's video idyll is awarded a room of its own, although its narcotic prettiness is undercut by the sandpaper rasp of Mr. Indiana's voice and Céline's nightmare words. The overlap is nicely judged in a show that doesn't track with equal success from piece to piece but makes a distinctive cumulative read, like an intense page of entries from an archskeptical's personal notebook.