

March 18, 2001

ART REVIEWS; Divided by Beliefs, but United in Abstraction

By HELEN A. HARRISON

'Painted in New York City'

Emily Lowe Gallery, Hofstra Museum, 112 Hofstra University, Hempstead. Through April 12. (516) 463-5672.

United by no particular ideology, philosophy or aesthetic program, the 11 artists in this exhibition share both a geographical base and a commitment to abstract painting. The tendentious, even bitter, tone of the catalog would lead one to think that such a commitment is comparable to martyrdom, but it is refreshing to note that the art itself -- from geometric formalism to exuberant Expressionism -- belies that notion.

By weaving complex patterns that confuse positive and negative, foreground and background, Charles Burwell delights in confounding perception. David Mackenzie's collage painting also uses trompe l'oeil to suggest spatial ambiguity. Charles Hinman's "Wall Wings," a shaped canvas amplified by its own shadow, hovers between flatness and volume.

Shadows and planes are only implied in Thornton Willis's "Red Shield," which varies the triangle theme in a grid format. Gerald Jackson highlights the physicality of paint in an untitled canvas, which also exploits the medium's versatility and contradicts the stereotype of acrylic as a lifeless material.

In "Tribal Thing," James Little holds his composition firmly in check but invigorates geometry with velvet textures that animate his colors' waxy surfaces. The shapes that populate Stewart Hitch's "Liteflies" are lifted from the urban stockpile of graffiti and peeling walls, reorganized and thereby redefined as art.

Joan Thorne's "Belriguardo" allows rudimentary images to hover in an environmental matrix, although the references to both objects and setting are oblique.

Expo XX

B. J. Spoke Gallery, 299 Main Street, Huntington. Through March 25. (631) 549-5106.

This well-rounded juried show, selected by the art critic Phyllis Braff, features collage paintings by Elaine Clance, monoprints by Adela Liebowitz, David Herman's schematic abstractions, photographs by Victoria Gewerz and Joy Goldkind, mixed-media collages by Luigi Ermini and sculpture by Shayne Dark.

In addition to choosing the exhibitors, Ms. Braff awarded a cash prize to Mr. Dark, who uses glass fragments and ball bearings to create circular wall and floor pieces that transform the character of their materials.

Most of Mr. Dark's works are variations on a convex shape resembling a shield. Mr. Dark's most intriguing pieces, however, are made of loose materials, like the mound of shattered glass in "Zero," with its ring of neon submerged in the glistening shards, and "In the Round," a steel bump that appears to be emerging from a blanket of ball bearings that have rolled down its sides like lava from an eruption.

Ms. Goldkind's photographs deal with an entirely different sort of transformation. With her husband, Bill, as her armature, she fashions an imaginary cast of characters that she calls "Girl Friends." The personae are all feminine, but none are female -- that is, one is never in doubt that this is a man in drag, playing roles like abused housewife, blushing bride, flirtatious geisha and sassy dancer. What raises them a notch above cross-dressing comedy is Bill's wonderfully ambiguous facial expressions, part artifice, part revelation, simultaneously defiant and vulnerable.

Stark black and white designs by Mr. Herman treat language as a structural system and a message code. His "Babel" series uses letters as building blocks that interlock to make alphabetic towers as light as filigree and as strong as words themselves. The endlessly repeating sequences, superimpositions and inversions are obsessively graphic, emphasizing the abstract nature of writing and the need to decipher its meaning.

'The Office'

Anthony Giordano Gallery, Dowling College, Idle Hour Boulevard, Oakdale. Through April 29. (631) 244-3016. www.islipartmuseum.org.

Like something imagined by Franz Kafka, Luis Camnitzer's installation conjures up a dehumanized bureaucratic environment. Dimly lighted by five bare bulbs suspended from long cords, the scene suggests an administrative workplace abandoned by its functionaries.

There is no clear reason, or reasons, for their desertion. At various points around the room, clues hint at the causes, although the viewer is given no definitive answer to the puzzle. But the strong implication is that best-laid plans have gone disastrously awry.

A major problem seems to be the inability to process information. Inside a desk-shaped structure of iron pipes, piles of newspapers are stacked like so much raw data awaiting interpretation. Evidently the material has overwhelmed the clerk assigned to the task, who is symbolized by a water glass that looks to be sinking into the sea of newsprint on which it sits.

On the desktop, fragments of photographs, text, money and maps are impaled on a spike, as if they have been culled from the pile. Were they pulled at random or deliberately chosen? Either way, they have not been dealt with.

Like the newspapers, everything in the room is methodical, orderly and contained, yet the underlying impression is of disaster. One has the feeling that Mr. Camnitzer has constructed an elaborate metaphor of the contest between humans and nature, and a commentary on misguided efforts to manipulate the environment without realizing the consequences.

E-mail: liart@nytimes.co