

Art

The LA/NY Cultural Exchange

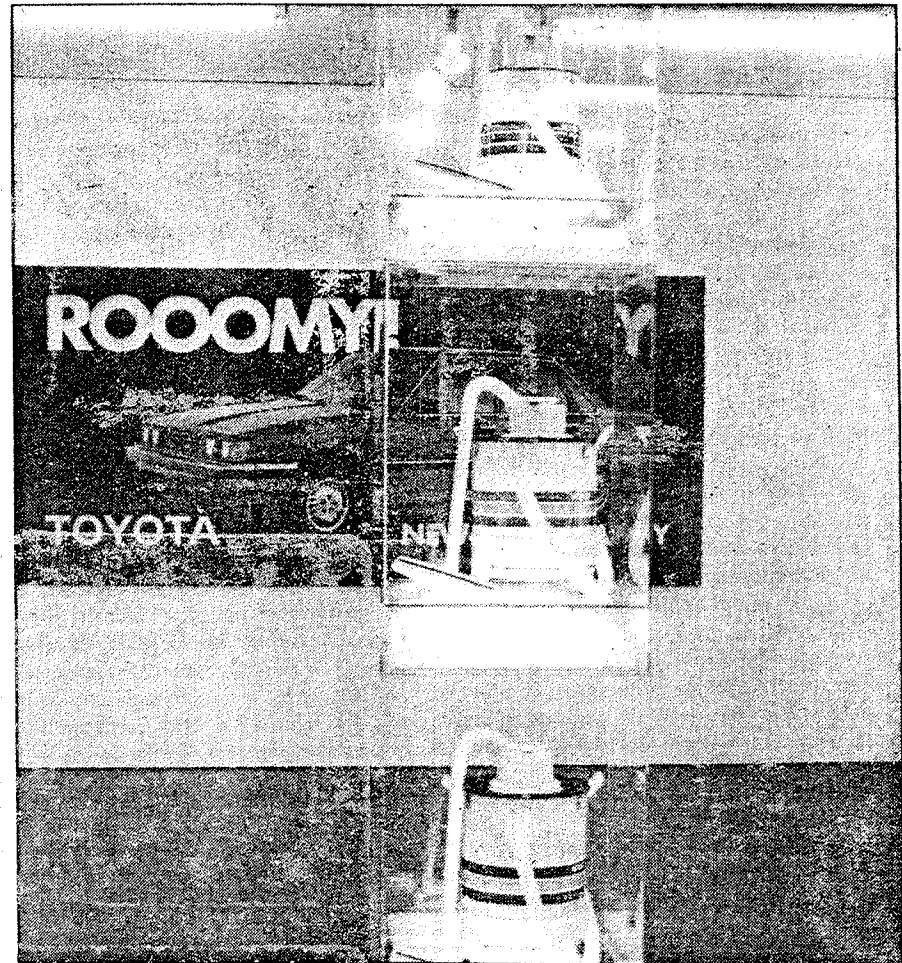
by Hunter
Drohojowska

This is an L.A. versus New York story, with a twist. To wit: one of L.A.'s major alternative showing spaces, the LACE Gallery, got together with the Artist's Space in New York to exchange artists for simultaneous shows. Although not really meant to test the proposition, oft heard in the L.A. arts community, that "you can't go wrong in Los Angeles if you say that New York is the place to be" — a strange, reverse chauvinism — the shows quite nicely provide the opportunity to examine just that.

Six artists from each city were chosen by Linda Shearer, the director of Artist's Space, and Marc Pally, former director of LACE. At this writing, there has been no

East Coast critical response to the works of the L.A. artists — Jill Giegerich, Victor Henderson, Kim Hubbard, Lari Pittman, Mitchell Syrop and Megan Williams. But there has been widespread speculation that "our" show in New York is "better" than "their" show here. At first, I thought so too. Now, I wonder if it isn't simply that like-minded, same-generation artists from the two coasts deal with contemporary art issues in visual languages that are quite foreign to one another; that, in fact, there is less common perspective than has been presumed.

All 12 artists from both cities work from an intellectual base, as opposed to one that is purely visceral. All were influenced by the conceptual art movement that preceded them, wherein the idea, the concept, superseded the significance of the art object. This ideology is direct and obvious among the New Yorkers chosen for the show, while among "our" artists, it is



oblique and covert. Most of those from L.A., while politically concerned, still make their art about art. The New Yorkers have taken their art into the social and political arena, to be gadflies

and to try to evoke more from viewers than visual responses. Their effectiveness ranges from intriguing to didactic.

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On the intriguing end is Charles Clough. Using his fingers Clough paints gestural strokes of color over enlarged photographs of Old Master paintings. The process itself is meant to comment on the cycle of art production and reproduction and is an inescapable outgrowth of philosopher and writer Walter Benjamin's widely quoted essay, "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Benjamin deals with the way an artwork becomes pure information through mass reproduction in books and magazines. To him, the blown-up detail of a painting is itself an abstract bunch of daubs.

Clough emphasizes and parodies the physicality of the brushstrokes that compose the original painting, understanding as he does so that *his* efforts will eventually be reproduced and have the "look" of an abstract expressionist work. His style is ironic, questioning as it does romantic notions of art and self-expression. Clough puts forth complex queries, supplies answers, then questions the results. It's a convoluted dialogue and more subtle in many ways than the work of his colleagues.

Nachume Miller is the only so-called "straight" artist in the LACE exhibition. He is a painter who admires art history. Lumpen, muscular, nude men, their heads shaved, stand or sit, stiffly self-conscious in darkened rooms. Big-footed and open-palmed, they are a bit Neanderthal. Each is in a panel of somber color, their forms given hugeness by

cross-hatching and excessive modeling. The men seem to be waiting with eternal patience, deciding what to do with a piece of fabric. These scenes are not only evocative of existential dilemma, they make numerous references to art history — such as Michelangelo's drawings of the shrouds, or Greek sculptures of wrestlers.

Jeff Koons has taken the concept of representation to exaggerated lengths by installing unaltered advertisements and products in the gallery. All are "new." There is an electric sign for "New 100s Merit Ultra Lights"; a billboard for "Toyota New Family Camry"; three vertically stacked boxes containing Jet Vac floor cleaners, called "New Shelton Wet/Dry Triple Decker"; and the fourth product, a back-lit sign of a black-and-white photograph of the artist as a young man with his crayons, called "New Jeff Koons." This is a multi-valent statement on the work of art as product, the sculpture and painting literally drawn from the stuff of the world, insisting that context be the only boundary between art and life. There is a reference to our collective obsession with "new." It's an amusing, off-the-wall sort of installation — especially the apotheosis of the vacuum cleaners — but you can't help thinking of it as the immaculate 1980s legacy of Andy Warhol.

Reese Williams is publisher of Tanam Press, and an artist concerned with the appropriation and presentation of public news photographs. At the gallery, seven originally unrelated images have been enlarged to an impressive scale, then tacked to the wall in a cinematic montage. Our conditioning to draw meaning from

disparity is such that the pictures — of liberated POWs, of a figure traversing a snowy plain, of a negative image of power transformers, of dark-skinned prisoners, of a hand pulling a shower ring, and of a boat of Asians — coalesce into a message of ominous tone with connotations of political oppression. You free-associate the connections. It's similar to watching the evening news without sound, changing the channels, and still coming away with a pretty good idea of the day's happenings. Williams is underscoring the thoroughness of our visual literacy.

Rebecca Howland and Christy Rupp were both involved in Collaborative Projects, or COLAB, the artists' cooperative responsible for last year's Times Square Show, the emphasis of which was inexpensive, politically conscious work.

Howland's sculpture, "Strata: Coal and Oil Relief," is a zigurat shape carved from "permanent acid-resistant outdoor material." Imagery of corrupt capitalism and environmental disaster is cheerfully modeled on the two sides. Factories belching smoke are being soaked by acid rain, gold coins pour into money bags, and flaming oil tanks are rendered in bands like hieroglyphs. It's a funky, slightly messy work, but the artist's primary interest does not seem to be the visual effectiveness of the art. This is dismayingly apparent in a trashy second sculpture, "Niagara Falls," a well-meaning but didactic anti-Reagan tract whose only merit is political.

Rupp's installation of cardboard fish is accompanied by notices describing the effects of acid rain on the breeding cycle of the brook trout. From reading the sad

facts, you learn that the trout lose their sense of sight and smell, and their ability to spawn. Because the fish that prey on them also die, the trout are prompted by biological instinct to eat their young. Eventually, the entire breeding cycle is unsuccessful and that's the end of the brook trout. It's a tale that would move anyone but James Watt. The emotion, however, is not evident in the pretty cardboard fish, but in the printed xerox.

The sort of obvious, literal, humorless approach taken by both Howland and Rupp is ultimately discouraging. Political art at its most effective works amid the interstices of political concepts and actions, as a sort of guerilla attack. Williams' photographs, even Koons' products, are cleverly subversive. The problem with stating it straight, as Howland and Rupp do, is that nothing is left to the imagination. No one has to stretch, or to think, to appreciate the information.

Judging by the LACE show, one would have to conclude that the awareness of the artist's place in a commercial society is much more widespread in New York than L.A. Every artist in the show is sophisticated in the knowledge that he or she is producing objects for a market. Some react against this, some comment on it, some play along with it. But it is more a part of their art, and their life, than it could be for anyone from Los Angeles, where a market barely exists. Most of all it's a separate sensibility, less concerned with the sensuous immediacy of the object, more self-conscious of its theoretical underpinnings. It's a smart show (on view at LACE through July 9). ■