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ART

Finding Unity in Wild Individualism

By VIVIEN RAYNOR

ARTISTS Space, in New York City, is so called because it is run by artists instead of civilians. The gallery was established to enable artists to qualify collectively for public funding and to alleviate the bottleneck caused by too many aspirants chasing too few galleries. So there's some irony in 10 of its brighter luminaries appearing at the Neuberger Museum at the State University College of New York at Purchase.

The event sheds light on the organization's esthetic tilt as well as marking its sixth anniversary. It also implies a bid to offset the unfortunate publicity sustained last March over a show in New York called "The Nigger Drawings," which caused a minor uproar in art circles over freedom of expression versus racism.

The participants in the Neuberger show have shown in other galleries but Charles Simonds has gained much of his reputation on the streets of the Lower East Side, building little earthworks in vacant lots and assorted nooks and crannies. These are the settlements that purportedly have been made by a tribe of "little people" who wander the streets of New York City but who, in honor of this show, are now roaming Westchester.

At the museum, Mr. Simonds has launched also on a green glass "sea" a group of tiny buildings and squares of open ground. In his explanatory text, the artist points out that "reality has intervened" since he first started making "Floating Cities," and to prove it he includes a clipping about a pulp plant built in Japan and towed to Brazil.

The piece is not too convincing as the social criticism it's meant to be, nor

does it have the magic of the artist's street pieces. But it includes some amusing details, as when, in a fantasy about himself as a reporter observing a floating city in action, Mr. Simonds notes that the inhabitants solve the crime problem by casting off offenders, who then join "pirate" flotillas.

Everyone represented is wildly individualistic, of course, but that only heightens the effect of solidarity. And despite the social atmosphere in which, reportedly, the show was assembled (some artists working in situ), the impression is of a group united mainly by a kind of creative autism.

Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt, for instance, is into icons, possibly lost beyond recall. He has turned his space into a grotto to be entered through a security gate threaded with plastic flowers, its floor decorated with squares of nursery linoleum. Lighted by bulbs shaded with aluminum collanders, the room features a structure recalling the religious objects, which the late Southern naïve James Hampton made by incrusting furniture with silver foil. On a box stands a table over which swarms elaborately worked "vegetation" in silver and colored foil and around which loiter gold and silver guinea pigs with eyes of colored glass.

Set askew on top of this are three tiers of smaller tablelike forms covered also in foil and decorated with Christmas lights, frills of colored cellophane or plastic, lollipop shapes, stars and so forth. But the artist's passion is in the icons — Byzantine images of maidens and red-haired saints laid, apparently, on cushions of foil and glazed in amber plastic. Quilted at the edges, — and sometimes at the haloes — with silver braid, the pictures have borders

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A silver foil-incrusted icon by James

Hampton at the Neuberger Museum

of colored foil.

Mr. Lanigan-Schmidt's display, with John Borofsky's giant fish painted on the lobby ceiling, are but the appetizers: the main course is served by Judy Pfaff, down the hall in the museum's theater gallery. Here, it's as if the combined 1920's canvases of Kandinsky, together with sundry Constructivist works, had exploded all over the floor, the walls and even parts of the ceiling, their elements translated into painted wood, metal and various plastics.

Eventually, the spectator can discern a plot that involves stick figures of all sizes walking (in one case up the wall), dancing and hanging by their heels among abstract assemblages. Miss Pfaff's prodigality is a shade disturbing over all, but there's no doubt of her ingenuity with modern art history. She shows, too, a touch of Steinbergian humor, especially in the giant easel-like figure made of two-inch beams that is walking into the wall.

Affected, it seems, by the tinselly process art of Lynda Benglis, John Torreano shows thickly painted oblongs studded with colored "jewels" and similarly treated canvases. Barbara Schwartz also achieves a cheap chic with her disks, curlicues and avian

shapes which, attached to the wall, are made from pulp and plastic applied to wire mesh and painted gaudy colors.

Ree Morton seems bent on deflecting attention from her talent as a straight painter by dividing her images of fish and sea between two horizontal canvases and draping them with plastic curtains. In another vein is her floor piece consisting of a large wire spiral bound in painted material and decorated with red, yellow and green knots.

The work of Lois Lane, a painter of some distinction, looks wrong in this company, especially the composition of matte black silhouettes of a bird and a shirt laid on glossy black ground.

Visitors may pick up Laurie Anderson's phone and listen — even reply to — an anonymous message. But they won't be able to sit at Scott Burton's table which, at 16 feet across, is monumental sculpture. A mock-up in wood over a metal armature, it consists of a cone inverted on one disk and supporting another and it is painted gray with white spatter. Casting dramatic shadows in the sunlight during the reviewer's visit, it showed an affinity to the spacey art of John Willenbecher.

Perhaps that's the way to sum up this show: artists spaced out. ■