

Art/Kay Larson

# BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATERS

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“... ‘Art in the Anchorage’ hasn’t a dud or a dull spot. The show achieves an exceptional peak of consistency and clarity. . . .”

HERE IS ONE OF THE GREAT SECRET SPACES of New York. Where the Brooklyn Bridge meets the Brooklyn shore, brickwork arches reach down to bedrock. Who, casually crossing the bridge, could imagine that these massive bases are hollow on the inside? Predating modern, solid-concrete construction, huge brick arches hold up vaulted ceilings set high above in gloom, a

perpetually reverberating with the Niagara of vehicles overhead. The scale is Piranesian: cool catacombs walled against the heat and light outside. The Anchorage is less secret since Creative Time took it over six years ago for a summer-long program of installations and performances. Since then, several thousand people a season have discovered the refuge. This year, something jelled. “Art in the Anchorage” hasn’t a dud or a dull spot, rare enough in the put-it-up-take-it-down world of installation art. The show achieves a peak of consistency and clarity that makes it exceptional in my memory.

Programs such as “Art in the Anchorage” are becoming increasingly crucial as the forces of repression descend on the art world. Every artist working on serious issues now faces not just diminished NEA support but the self-censorship of some private agencies, and nervous reactions from traditional institutions worried about jeopardizing their money-making exhibitions by presenting marginalized “experimental” shows. In such a climate, Creative Time—patched together budget-wise with Band-Aids and shoestrings—can do more, in giving space and energy to artists on some kind of edge, than many an established behemoth.

It has done just that this year, feeling all sorts of urgencies: censorship, the desperate plight of juvenile runaways, homelessness, disease, and death. Despite that bleak list, this art is nicely complex and ambiguous, displaying the slippery depths of a fully rounded experience. The organizers have avoided agitprop, that one-way exit to an agenda. Art, even socially com-

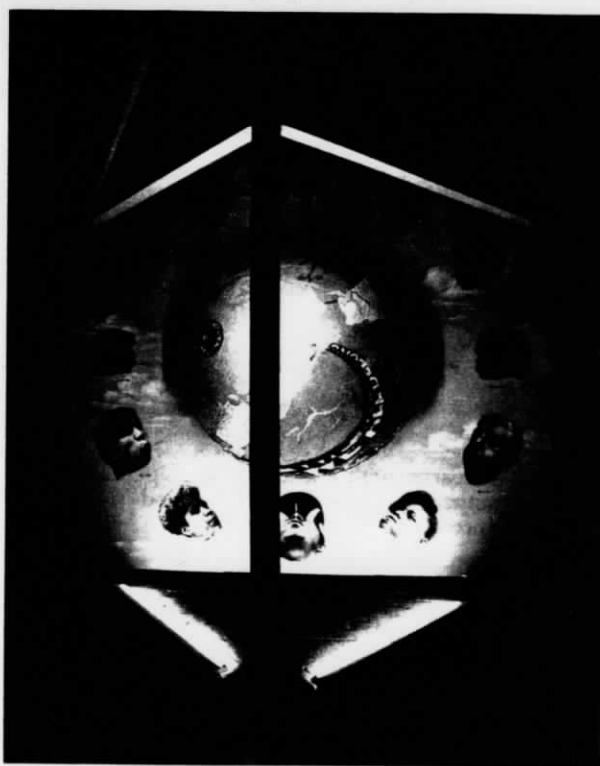
mitted art, is not going to give beds to the homeless or find a cure for AIDS. In its fullest sense, it’s a tool of recognition, a collective pond of consciousness. The artists in the Anchorage have realized the site’s dramatic potential. Each isolated bay within this edifice is a subterranean stage and a platform for the surreal, the gentle discord that edges you out of your habit-

the debris of creation. Its bleached body is a totem, a spare memorial to the cycles of dying.

So it goes. Christopher Doyle sets up a wonderfully clever meditation on the separation of mind and body in Christian (read “Western”) dualistic thinking. An elegantly stripped-down wine-red box, like a magician’s magic box, is the walk-in container in *Reliquary (For the Head of St. John the Baptist)*. A video monitor “chops” off Doyle’s head, in the manner of the talking heads of television. Your seat inside the box forces you, among other startling things, to sit back against a wall of jars holding animal eyes—real ones, from butchered cows and sheep. Doyle indicts a legion of dualisms, including the belief that animals have no souls, the separation of heart and mind in our media (and medical) world, and religion’s antagonism toward bodies. You go on picking shards of this piece out of your brain long after you leave.

Toni Dove’s *Mesmer—In the Echo Chamber* presents a scheme as vast as Doyle’s. I don’t know what you would call these shifting layers of slide-projected images, songs, and voices—something like a thinking, animated hologram? A Gothic high-tech horror movie? Disintegrated and fragmented characters, based on Freud’s study of Dora, the voiceless victim of sexual abuse, speak their parts in a paradigm of female consciousness. What does it mean to lose your voice? To be penetrated by an alien sensibility? To repeat, like Echo, whatever is demanded? Being female is like being colonized. But men are also invaded by alien identities—sexual, social, and so on. As the darkness and the voices spin you out of control, into deep space, you lose for a moment the mental moorings that constitute personality.

Less self-reflective, less complicated, but no less pointed pieces remain: Jim Goldberg’s wrenching photo-documentary and installation on the plight of abused children. **A plea for tolerance in post-Columbus, multicultural America, by Yong Soon Min.** The biting observations of per-



PEOPLED: Yong Soon Min's Over There/Here/Out There.

ual rigidities and opens the door for thought and feeling.

The tactics can be simple. Just inside the entrance, Marc Blane has built a chain-link screen of crutches and upturned derelict bottles. An obvious theme (addictions are crutches) is given depth by the elegance of presentation and the hints of physical pain. In the next bay, Nancy Rubins has erected a tree trunk that fell near her house in California, and added a set of bins filled with scrap from a piece she did in Washington with her friend Peter Kunz. Kunz is dead. Suddenly, it works. The tree, blighted and burned, felled by disease and disaster, reaches toward the spotlight vault of the ceiling out of

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formance artist Jerri Allyn on the hypocrisy of censorship, as practiced not just by conservatives but by the "liberals," for instance, who attacked Andy Rooney. And David Nechak's lightly meditative installation featuring the disembodied voices of elderly Seattle residents, fluttering like blue spirits over the mouths of open books.

You could end with Izhar Patkin's weird and initially off-putting grotesques. Based on Bernini's *The Ecstasy of Santa Theresa* and Baroque sculptures in the Villa Palagonia, Patkin's lurid plaster-and-wax figures of old men and putti are covered with scabby scales; they roll and tumble off their narrow base and howl into an infirm wind. On first sight, they seem the last word in obnoxiousness—which sells a lot of art these days. But their outlandishness has a hard edge. Artists can occupy extremes, from ecstasy to nightmare, that mere mortals would fear to camp in, and can find sustenance there. Everything about *Palagonia* that is wild, unorthodox, and gargoylish becomes an analogue to the unleashed imagination of the artist, where anything goes. Its excess is its salvation.

The alternative to this kind of work is the marketplace production of slick, consumerist baubles that cynically comment on the degenerate consumer spending in the gallery world while their creators stash the profits in tax-free funds. Artists who make art for the carriage trade will collect their Faustian rewards in the short run and pay the Devil in the long run. In the meantime, the rest of us can be glad that dedicated, spirited, and selfless organizations like Creative Time continue to speak for the other side.

("Art in the Anchorage" runs through October 7. Base of bridge at Cadman Plaza West and Old Front Street. A performance series includes appearances in Lincoln Center by Alien Comic [August 11], and in September, Karen Finley, Laurie Carlos, and Robbie McCauley in the Anchorage.)