

Review/Art

In a Show on the Issues, The Focus Is Outrage

By ROBERTA SMITH

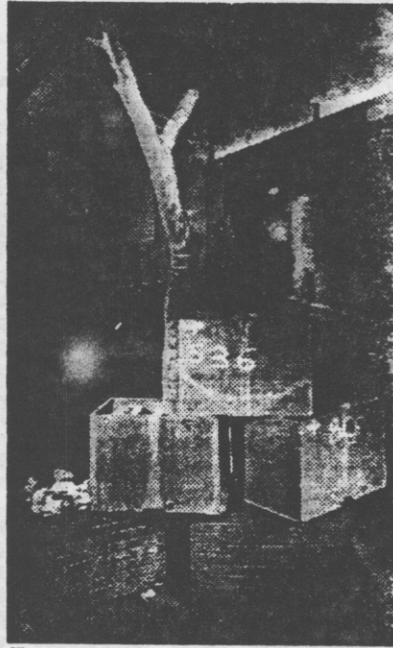
"Art in the Anchorage" is a great way to beat the heat and feel it too. This seventh annual summer show of installation artworks, organized by Creative Time Inc., takes place in one of the city's greatest hidden interiors: the cavernous brick vaults of the Brooklyn Bridge's Anchorage (Brooklyn side), a space pleasantly immune to the waves of heat and humidity assaulting the Northeast.

At the same time, the art on view, this year by nine artists, is highly sensitized to the current political climate and shredding fabric of American life. Homelessness, alcoholism and censorship are prominent subjects. Evidence is given that the art of human concern, of focused outrage, is on the rise, which also increases the challenge of judging art whose heart may be in the right place even if its visual components aren't.

Mostly, it's still the same old story, the fight between form and meaning, although there are some new wrinkles.

This exhibition abounds with the force — the awfulness and goodness — of life, yet the esthetic powers of the art on view are often low voltage, dimmed by didacticism, by excessive complexity or by simplicity or derivativeness.

In certain works, message supersedes medium to an unfortunate degree. Above the exhibition's entrance, a large, drab, three-part painting by Paul H-O and Roger Boyce proclaims "Demolish the Wall of Censorship." Within, it is possible to sympathize with many of the sentiments that motivate Jerri Allyn's "Pulling My Hair Out," which uses tape cassettes attached to various pieces of furniture — a church pew, a school desk, a torture device — to criticize what the artist sees as various forms of obscenity (religious, educational, governmental and so on). On tape, Ms. Allyn wonders why the record of a black rap group, the 2 Live Crew, is censored while that of Andrew Dice Clay, an equally discomfiting white comic, is not, or whether there's a homoerotic aspect to worshipping "a nearly naked and bleeding man nailed to a cross."



Adam Hume/Creative Time, Inc

"Veins, Connections and Points of Departure," by Nancy Rubins, part of an installation in the vaults of the Brooklyn Bridge.

A similar sense of empathy may operate with "Over There/Here/Out There," an installation piece by Yong Soon Min that involves a gigantic globe of the world reminiscent of an elementary school project, a rainbow coalition of photographs (including Nelson Mandela's) and the admirable advice to "Think globally, act locally." The problem with both Ms. Allyn's and Ms. Min's efforts is that they're not particularly good art: they hold the attention by the power of moral principle, not esthetic effect. They seek to enlighten us about the world without bothering to enlighten us about art.

A different problem plagues Jim Goldberg's "Memories of Swinging on Swings," an installation dedicated to Mitch Snyder, the advocate of the homeless who recently killed himself. It invites the viewer first into a cozy living room where home movies are playing on a television set, and then outside its white clapboard and picket-fence facade to sit on park benches while the faces and scrawled

words of homeless teen-agers are projected on a large overhead screen. The evidence of one ruined life, one dysfunctional family after another is both heartrending and numbing, but its documentary power turns the rest of the work into an unnecessary framing device. All told, the children's words and their photographs, which were taken by Mr. Goldberg, would make a better book. If this happens, the essay in the brochure that accompanies the installation, written by an art critic and poet, David Levi Strauss, should serve as an introduction. It examines the children's plight with an eloquence and a specificity that exceeds Mr. Goldberg's.

Other pieces offer more to consider in the way of form, although here it is meaning that goes fuzzy. Toni Dove's complicated "Mesmer — in the Echo Chamber," with its combination of soundtrack and projected images and texts, its invocations of Freud and his famous patient Dora, suggests again that another medium (possibly the theater) might be more appropriate.

Christopher Doyle and Nancy Rubins work capably with video technology and large scale, respectively, but their efforts also suggest how tried and familiar the conventions of installation art have become. Mr. Doyle's "Reliquary (for the Head of St. John the Baptist)" includes a stretch of sandy desert on which is projected a medieval image of the headless saint, and a red confessional booth that is full of bottled specimens (some organic, some of the computer chip variety) and equipped with a television screen on which a man's head appears.

More convincing is Ms. Rubins's "Veins, Connections and Points of Departure," which levitates an enormous tree above a loose pyramid of equally huge trash containers and metal bins, some filled with discarded appliances and bundles of Ree-Bar (the rough metal rods used to reinforce concrete). The contrast of the displaced natural form and human wastefulness is hard to miss, although a label informs us that the work is made in memory of a friend and that the trash is from a prior installation work that he helped Ms. Rubin build.

Izhar Patkin's "Palagonia" is the exhibition's one sculpture: a large arrangement of life-sized figures and puttilike children made of wax that seems to be melting like an enormous candle. It contrasts blatant sensuality with the specter of waste and transience, but it leans heavily on an eccentric materiality that has the gimmickiness of a costly store-window display. Also it is heavily quotational, part Jeff Koons, part Caravaggio.

Two final works, one by Marc Blaine, the other by David Nechak, balance form and medium most successfully, although this is a relative judgment. Mr. Blaine's "Resting Place" is a striking curtainlike structure made of more than 250 wooden crutches that stretches wall to wall and nearly floor to ceiling in the first big vault at the Anchorage. From each crutch hangs an empty pint-sized wine bottle labeled with the photograph of a man passed out on a sidewalk.

"The Elders Speak," an installation by Mr. Nechak of large, open books installed high on the walls of a nearly dark high-ceilinged chamber, offers the recorded reminiscences of several older people, talking from several points of view about the central experiences of their lives. The voices spring from one book, then another, a soft light flashing in unison with the words. Mixing at times with other more inchoate sounds and echoes, the lighted words have an intimate yet ceremonial effect and move the viewer around the darkened space from one well of memory to another.

The simplicity of Mr. Blaine's and Mr. Nechak's pieces works both for and against them, but more than anything else here, their installations deliver their messages experientially, and without undue editorializing.

In the end this show gives its visitors a lot to think about by defining some of the rocks and hard places of form and meaning in contemporary art: how to do artistic justice to a burning cause, how to plumb the depths of more subtle, seemingly personal subjects. These are the issues that the artists in this exhibition face. A final question might be: with all the usual talk about painting being dead, has anyone taken the pulse of installation art lately?

"Art in the Anchorage" remains at the Brooklyn Bridge Anchorage, Cadman Plaza West and Old Front Street, Brooklyn, through Oct. 7.

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