

ART

American exhibition spots trends but misses realism

By Alan G. Artner
Art critic

The Art Institute's 74th American Exhibition is a large, provocative show that nonetheless gives an inaccurate report on art of our time.

It is not off by much—certainly not as much as the last installment that proclaimed "the end of painting and sculpture as formerly known." But as a survey of significant trends, it continues to ignore the very one that underlines what curator A. James Speyer has called "the state of anarchy in art today."

This is, of course, the trend toward realistic representation. It has been acknowledged by other museums, exaggerated in the popular press, even interpreted as a sign of the "new conservatism." But at the institute American shows, realism has not been examined in any depth since 1974.

So great (and long-standing) an omission is curious, to say the least. Still, perhaps Tom Wolfe was right: Art of the last decade is most notable for the way it has given rise to theories, the verbal or written explanations that attempt to aggrandize works of slim visual appeal. Realism does not encourage such alibis, which is disheartening to those who rejoice in an art of ideas.

How do we then explain the inclusion of some new young expressionists, the painters said to react against the idealized art of the recent past? Taken at face value, theirs is surely an art of strong color and gesture that engages the eye rather than the mind.

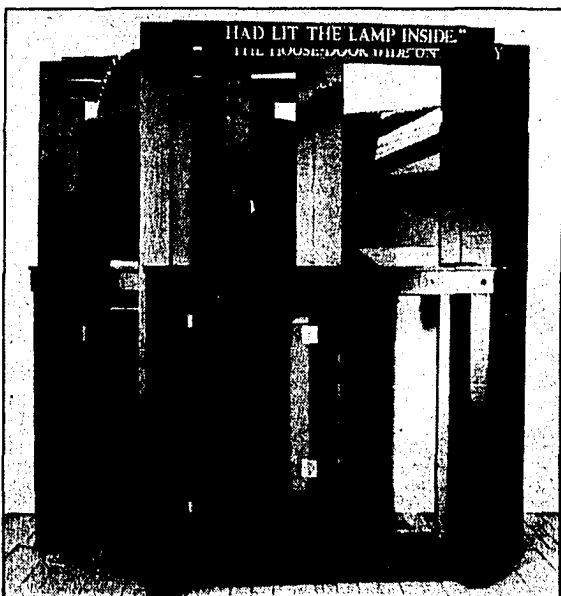
But it is a mistake to take such work at face value, for while the young expressionist painters reject a conceptual base, their dialogue involves a studied appropriation of older styles. Where style used to be the signature of the artist, naturally growing from within, here it is a counterfeit applied from without. And in that gap is nestled a whole new set of theories that attempts to explain and give value to ironic distance.

Once more, the focus has been shifted to ideas: Richard Bosman's debt to detective stories and movies, Peter Dean's involvement with social history, Julian Schnabel's strategy of quotation. How any of these artists paint the human figure—for all of them do—is less important than how the times have occasioned a highly self-conscious framework. The celebration that preceded the art again is what counts.

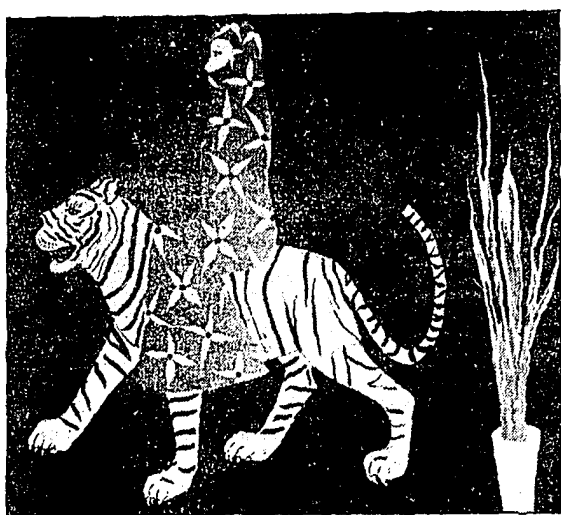
Thus, there is a thread that binds the 37 artists represented in the exhibition, and it is not so much "art of our day" as the "day" itself. For years we have watched a waning of the spirit of innovation that characterized art from the first half of this century; now we are probing works to discover what sustains life after the spirit is dead. The whole point of the show seems to lie outside the art, in our culture at the



Richard Bosman's "Adversaries": Part of the 74th American Exhibition.



"Dictionary for Building: Fireplace Mantel" by Siah Armajani: A desperate tone.



Joan Brown's "The Long Journey": Striking, but familiar.

present time.

All of Ward Gallery is given over to one source of nourishment: the popular media. As this was recently treated in an exhibition at the Renaissance Society, it will suffice to repeat that the [generally negative] influence of newspapers, magazines, films and TV has been taken as the basis for conceptual works that are as nagging and slight as their objects of scorn. The tone—even when visually "upbeat," as in paintings by Jack Goldstein, offset lithographs by Sherrie Levine and a sculpture by Siah Armajani—is desperate. Why Richard Tuttle's fresh, childlike gouaches have been set in such company is anyone's guess.

The second part of the show is in the Morton Wing, with works progressing from figurative to abstract. The entranceway gives prominence to a realist relief by John Ahearn, but this lone example is of primary interest because of the social interaction that was part of the artist's process. Ahearn gets to know the community in which he works, and he celebrates it with affection. However, the emphasis is on a relationship not unlike the one that used to give rise to neighborhood murals. Both embody populist sentiment in ways that are not particularly striking to the eye. [Figurative paintings by Joan Brown and Ray Yoshida are striking, but that kind of naivete is, to Chicagoans, much more familiar.]

Little remains to be said about the contingent of expressionists, except that Schnabel's two canvases are of a higher order than the leftovers seen in his one-man show at a local gallery. The surfaces here are extremely seductive and go some distance toward explaining the hubbub he has caused. Dean's two paintings also provide a lesson for most young Chicago painters whose slather is, by comparison, decidedly tame.

The initial awkwardness of "New Image" painters [Robert Moskowitz,

Susan Rothenberg] has been refined away. Certain abstract artists have taken to parading their sources [the most obvious being Katherine Porter's reworking of Sonia Delaunay]. Contemporary sculptors toy with larger statements [Joel Shapiro], but ultimately settle for comfortable explorations of materials and form [Bryan Hunt, Scott Burton].

All of this contributes to an impression that the show is fascinating as a whole, but relatively undistinguished part by part. Would anyone really want to see Sol LeWitt's isometric wall drawing more than once? How well would the visual puzzle of Dan Graham's "pavillon" stand up under repeated viewings? And what about the linear exercises of Mel Bochner? Each is disappointing without its respective *alibi*.

Not that some works aren't compelling: Larry Bell's "Corner Lamp," Elizabeth Murray's interlocking canvases, Bruce Nauman's suspended sculpture and James Turrell's marvelous installation [which the Society for Contemporary Art had the good sense to buy]. But the thrust of the show is such that visual achievement almost seems out of place; so many artists elevate the difficulty of creating that when we encounter those who make an imaginative leap of faith, it is they who look strange.

In a sense, then, Michael Asher's conceptual *etude* will prepare visitors for most of the artists' frame of mind: Six people silently staring at early 20th-Century paintings cannot help but suggest professional mourners at a much-protracted wake.

As is customary, several \$1,000 awards were presented, some accompanied by medals. The recipients were Armajani, Asher, John Baldessari, Bell, Dara Birnbaum, Bochner, Burton, Jenny Holzer, LeWitt, Murray, Nauman, Martin Puryear, Rothenberg and Tuttle.

The exhibition continues through Aug. 1.



"San Salvador" by Katherine Porter: Abstract, but not awkward.