

# Art: Exxon Show at the Guggenheim

By ROBERTA SMITH

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**T**HE Guggenheim Museum's nine-year-old series of exhibitions devoted to the work of emerging artists and sponsored by the Exxon Corporation has come, at least momentarily, to a close. According to the museum, the series' cancellation is part of across-the-board cutbacks in Exxon's arts support that stem from the faltering oil market. Initiated in 1978 and continuing at a nearly annual rate until last fall, the "Exxon Nationals" and "Exxon Internationals," as they were called, introduced 85 artists from five different countries. Four of the eight exhibitions — in 1978, 1981, 1983 and 1985 — were devoted to American artists. Alternate years saw exhibitions of art from other countries: Britain in 1980, Italy in 1982, Australia in 1984 and, most recently, France in 1986. Additional funds from Exxon also enabled the museum to acquire a work by each artist in each exhibition for its permanent collection.

Thus, the Guggenheim has mounted its current exhibition, "Emerging Artists 1978-1986: Selections From the Exxon Series," by simply delving into its own holdings. In this manner, the museum reviews its performance on both the exhibition and the acquisition fronts and, in the process, seeks new support for its emerging artists series. The show, organized by Diane Waldman, the museum's deputy director, includes work by 51 of the 85 original artists and has been financed by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, Enichem Americus Inc. and the Grand Marnier Foundation. It reveals that the museum's performance has been extremely flawed, and does not recommend the series' revival in its present form. Nonetheless, the exhibition raises some hard questions about the responsibilities of major museums to contemporary art

and the role of corporate support in carrying out these responsibilities.

On paper, the Exxon series had its strong points. The show gave generous amounts of museum space to developing artists, and brought new information about art worldwide to one of art's most important centers. Nonetheless, most of the Exxon shows were not well received critically, nor did many important artists seem to emerge through their auspices. Moving through this mild, self-effacing exhibition, one has the sense that, above all, the Exxon shows occurred faster than their curators could comfortably research and select them, that the money would have been better used if spent more slowly. One also gets glimmers of what might be called a Guggenheim curatorial psychology: a desire to avoid seeming hip or up to date that ultimately comes across as simply uninformed. Only a little of the art introduced by the Exxon series has improved with time. In fact much of it looks worse, or at least so completely average that it is hard to imagine what the curators had in mind when they chose it.

The first of the Exxon series, a show of younger Americans organized by Linda Shearer in 1978 and including the work of Scott Burton, Bryan Hunt, Siah Armajani, Denise Green, Martin Puryear and Robert Lawrance Lobe — all present here — still seems, overall, to have been the best. The recent exhibition of French art, organized by one of the museum's assistant curators, Lisa Denison, also had its excellent moments, alerting New York to a vitality in French art that had been missing for some time.

In between, bad timing and bad choices seem to have dogged the series. As Alan Schwartzman, writing in the current issue of *Manhattan, Inc.*, points out, the 1980 British show ignored a number of promising young

sculptors, while the 1982 Italian show emphasized the already known: Neo-Expressionist and Arte Povera artists such as Enzo Cucchi and Sandro Chia, Gilberto Zorio and Giuseppe Penone. The museum itself seems to judge the 1981 Exxon National the weakest of the lot. Of its 19 original participants, only three reappear in this context, although one of these, Barbara Kruger, is, by crude measure, the exhibition's "hottest" artist.

For the most part the sculpture on view here is far better than the painting; excepting Miss Kruger's contribution, the photographic work — by Simon Read, Nic Nicosia and Bernard Faucon — is negligible.

Most of the developments in late 70's and early 80's art are alluded to here, but the allusions are often echoes of more authentic and vigorous occurrences elsewhere. Hugh O'Donnell, a British artist, works in a manner that seems to be a blend of Frank Stella and Howard Hodgkin, and it is a hackneyed, commercial art blend at that. Tom Lieber, a participant in the 1983 Exxon National, works in a manner reminiscent of Susan Rotherberg. Phoebe Adams's bronze wall sculpture amalgamates aspects of the work of Lynda Benglis and Nancy Graves. In all this, a strong sense of *déjà vu* prevails, with the strongest flavor, especially in the American and Australian selections, being that of a complacent, if competent, pluralism.

While individual Exxon exhibitions gave each artist several bays — room for several works — the scheme here is usually one work per artist, and one artist per bay. The exhibition then becomes a kind of cruel test, not unlike the auction house display, where one sees how lone works of art hold up under difficult circumstances. Isolated in individual bays, the works here have little chance to interact with one another; they seem to speak



Peter Booth's "Painting 1984" is in the show, "Emerging Artists 1978-1986: Selections From the Exxon Series," at the Guggenheim Museum.

only to the museum's great open atrium.

Moving down the ramp, through the exhibition's three tiers, the first work of art that catches the eye convincingly is "To Draw On," a 1977 painting by the American Denise Green, and it comes as a relief. In it, a white triangle with slightly rounded sides sits, almost like a sculptural object, on a field of yellow that is faintly dotted to suggest the presence of an organizing grid. The work exemplifies New Image painting with a slightly robust physicality, highly retinal color and admirable strength.

In the second tier, where sculpture dominates, the exhibition is at its best. One encounters a small table by Mr. Burton, delicately spattered with paint. In an unexpected fusion of decoration, function and fine art, the work evokes, *sotto voce*, a Jackson Pollock painting surface and an enlarged ceramic object, all within the context of understated "tableness." Continuing in a similar vein, Mr. Armajani's eccentric architectural work "Model for Lissitzky's Neighborhood, Center House" of 1978, and Mr. Hunt's levitating dirigible "King Crest" of 1976 reflect the return of recognizable form to 1970's sculpture.

Nearby, "Third Cenotaph" of 1979,

a work by another British artist, Keith Milow, consists of two iron-colored forms suggestive of skyscrapers that are cantilevered to opposite walls of a bay. The piece combines aspects of Mr. Hunt's work with those of Richard Serra, but it is also the only work in the exhibition to deal explicitly with the Guggenheim's architecture. In subsequent bays, striking works by two French artists, Richard Baqué and Ange Leccia, show how the tide of worldly awareness continues to wash across recent sculpture. Mr. Baqué's "Wing Slices" of 1987 is an intricate, and figurative, reworking of found materials that include a mattress and airplane wings. Mr. Leccia's "American Kiss" of 1986 puts two spotlights face to face with thoroughly anthropomorphic, not to mention Brancusian, results.

In the third and final tier of the exhibition, visual inertia sets in once more. Among paintings by Mr. Chia and Nino Longobardi of Italy, Jan Murray, Susan Norrie, Mandy Martin and Peter Booth of Australia, and Pegan Brooke and Rex Lau of the United States, only Mr. Booth's sprightly reprise of Neo-Expressionism has any semblance of visual life. Whit Ingram's "Wind, Bird, Ocean,"

a mixed-media wall relief that awards separate representation to each word in the title, is notable for its odd, singularly American spareness, descended from a terrain bounded by Milton Avery and Alexander Calder. But here, as in many other parts of this show, everything is all relative.

In a sense, this exhibition becomes an inadvertent argument for the best aspects of the commercial gallery system. It suggests that artists should rise up through this system's ranks before their art darkens the door of important museums. This is not an argument that one wants to hear: curators should be as good at ferreting out new art as art dealers; museums should also be flexible and take risks, and where there is risk, there must be allowance for failure as well as success. Both the Guggenheim's willingness to risk and its dedication to contemporary art are commendable. Nonetheless, given the level of new art from various parts of the globe that regularly finds its way onto the walls of New York's best commercial galleries, this exhibition and those from which it is culled should have been better.

(Through Oct. 25 at the Guggenheim, Fifth Avenue and 89th Street.)