

New York Times

LedisFlam March 3, 1989

“Beyond Slickness: Sculptors Get Back to Basics”

By Michael Brenson

In a season when the New York art world may seem to be wrapped in slick surfaces, status, and money, three surprising sculpture shows, in three different boroughs, zero in on a more naked and physical reality. Each show is, in a way, exclusive. All 11 artists in one are black; all six artists in another are women; in the third, the four artists are men. Yet all three shows are involved with big feelings and a search for experience that is shared and elemental.

“Traditions and Transformations: Contemporary Afro-American Sculpture,” at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, uses the work of black artists- as familiar as Martin Puryear, Sam Gilliam and Richard Hunt, and as unfamiliar as Maren Hassinger and Tyrone Mitchell- to call attention to the vitality of sculpture by black Americans.

“In a Dark Vein,” at the sculpture center in Manhattan, presents work by women who use the human figure to shape feelings of fear, loss, and pain.

“Four Americans: Aspects of Current Sculpture,” at the Brooklyn Museum, catches Joel Fisher, Mel Kendrick, Robert Lobe and John Newman at or near midcareer, a the precise point when all of them are working toward a more inclusive and monumental statement.

Almost all of the artists in these three shows use a hands-on approach and remain involved in the entire sculptural process. For all of them, the idea of a particularly American art makes little or no sense. They move easily across cultures and through the history of art, and within their work build an artistic community that is international.

Within all three shows, terms like radical and conservative are inappropriate. For example, if you are going to hold up these black sculptors to the tradition of the new, you are not going to bridge cultures and navigate the turbulent and liberating water of memory.

Melvin Edwards’s “Lynch Fragments” are at the heart of the Bronx Museum show, and they are a remarkable achievement. In these small reliefs, around a foot tall and installed at eye level, Western traditions of welding and assemblage are combined with African traditions of fetishes and masks. Objects used as tools by slaves and as instruments of violence *against* slaves- including ax heads, stakes, hammers, vises and chains- are cut and welded into eloquent expressions of rage, warning, hope and joy.

The terms radical and conservative cannot help with the Sculpture Center show either. If you are going to reject figurative sculpture out of hand, you are going to miss the ability of sculptors to use the figure to recreate man and woman in their own image and to pressure visitors to face the way they feel about themselves. With so much attention paid to super-sophisticated, super-self-conscious new art, it may be the kind of “old” art at the Sculpture Center that is most difficult to bear.

The artist Mary Ann Unger is the curator, and the struggle with cancer that inspired the show informs her work. Her “Eve Cast Out” is a woman in a skirt, bending over elegantly like a danced- or like a German Expressionist refugee by Ernst Barlach- her mouth open, her fire-black hands reaching for the middle of her back. In Ms. Unger’s “Guardian,” a naked woman cut off below the waist, hands on hips, her mouth a pit

facing the sky, suggests a Degas ironer or dancer. But this earthly figure has arms like wings and breasts like missiles. This is a fertility goddess, but of a peculiar kind- one who is both insisting on her fecundity and crying to get out of her skin.

Charlotta Kotik, the curator of the Brooklyn Museum show, believes that right now there is something of a return back to basics. "Most of the sculptors whose work commends our attention are neither trying to create radically new concepts nor trying to dissociate themselves from those created in the past," she writes in the catalogue. "Rather a deeply felt need, anchored within a solid knowledge of the evolution of the sculptural medium of this century, propels a large number of these artists to reinvestigate the intricacies of space, volume and mass."

The tension within contemporary sculpture between a commitment to a high degree of self-consciousness and a need to deal with feelings in a raw and immediate manner is one of the currents running through her show. The best example is Mr. Kendrick, who cuts up trees and then recombines them to give the sculpture a Cubistic, figurative and often tribal presence. He wants the viewer to be conscious of everything. He wants us to see wood as wood, base as base, sculpture as sculpture.

But he also wants something more. As much as he makes a point of disjunctiveness and disunity, he is also drawn to organic growth and wholeness. What is revealing about the current artistic moment is that his most recent sculpture is one of the largest, simplest, and most personal he has done. "Big Tree" is seven feet tall. It is cut and reassembled, but in big chunks, and it seems as heavy and shaggy as wood in the wild. In the catalogue, Mr. Kendrick discusses this alert, chopped-up, dignified creature as "my presence."

The increasing concern with large-scale and psychological and sculptural gravity can be felt in the work of the three other artists in the show. Mt Fisher is after everything. Together his works refer to the four elements. While he may be best known for his raucous, whiplash stick figures, he also makes fully three-dimensional sculptures, like "S," with its cylindrical head and low-slung body shifting elegantly in space.

"Wave," Mr. Fisher's newest work, is 7 feet long and 6 feet wide. It is like a headless reclining figure or a sea monster, but its big slithering body also has arms or legs. Mr. Fisher, like William Tucker and Alain Kirili, is trying to reinvent monumental sculpture through modeling, a method that leads away from welded steel sculpture and Minimalism, and back to Rodin. In "Wave," he uses clay to create a flamelike, earthy sculpture about air and water.

Mr. Newman started out even closer to Minimalism. His work, influenced by science and linguistics as well as music and art, has become an increasingly personal and expressive. His 1986 "Trumpeter's Case"- lying on the floor like a coffin, or a fallen figure, or a church bell waiting to be raised and rung- was inspired by his mother's death. "Inside the Cylinders that are never silent and a molecular, terra-cotta heart- was inspired by the death of his father.

One theme of "In a Dark Vein" at the Sculpture Center is sculpture and crisis. Nancy Fried, Arlene Love, **Deborah Masters**, Louise McCagg, Alison Saar and Ms. Unger use numerous sculpture traditions in their search for images that can both express and stop suffering. The prototypes for Ms. Fried's sculptures are Asian and South

American. Her terra-cotta heads- one spewing tiny breasts, another with miniature breasts set in wounds like jewels in a chain and a third, called "Life's Bitter Pill," with a face like a cookie on its defiantly extended tongue- are deliberate, sometimes witty renderings of extreme emotional states.

Ms. Love makes skulls, some grotesque, some sinister, some comic, some moronic, and places them on pedestals, like the fabric heads by Magdalena Abakanowicz, or mounts them on a wall, like Maura Sheehad, who, along with Ms. Love, has first-hand knowledge of Mexican art. Ms. McCagg's quirky, troubling, oracular "Figures I and II" are almost Bruegelseque. Modeled with real flair and plaster and coated with shoe polish, each of these short, skinny, armless and headless women is at a point of intersection between heaven and hell.

Another theme of the show is mythology and the female body shaped by a woman's hand. For example, **Ms. Masters's** "Jesse" suggests classical images of the Good Shepherd, or Picasso's "Man With Sheep," but her classical figure is a woman, and she is holding, carrying or offering her dying dog. Ms. Saar's Lazarus is not male but female. It was inspired not by Christianity but African legend. Dark blue and larger than life, made of wood and metal, with sores of cheap glass and breasts and buttocks held in place by tape and tacks. This is a funny and pointed work.

Ms. Saar is also in "Traditions and Transformations," at the Bronx Museum. The exhibition, organized by its chief curator, Philip Verre, spans three generations, from Elizabeth Catlett to Ms. Saar. Although not all the artists are well represented and the art is very uneven, the show makes two important points. One is the contribution of blacks to American sculpture. And with work by black artists responding to other black artists, the show also demonstrates that a tradition of sculpture by black Americans is firmly in place.

The tone of the show is suggested by the complex multimedia constructions of Howardena Pindell. They were formed by slicing up postcards- many gathered in Japan and India- then attaching them to museum board and painting in and around them. While they are travelogues and fans, they are also personal narratives and disembodied faces, shoulders and breasts; and they are pieces of armor and shields. These works are international in scope. They are confident, curious, soft and sharp.

This feeling for synthesis, ritual and conflict is present in Mr. Puryear's 1974 "Raquide Cone," a wall piece that looks like a breast with a tattered nipple. It is present in Ms. Hassinger's exposed trees, made with cable and planted in cement- two industrial materials identified with the destruction of nature. It is present in the archeological installations by Houston Conwill, with its dusty ring and mirrors and its symbols embedded in compartments for the future to excavate. It is present as well in the black architectural sculptures of George Smith, whose "Labyrinth Mastaba for S.B." is a maquette for a flat-top temple offering sacrifice and redemption.

It is clear from this show that these artists couldn't care less about most of the issues that have been hotly debated in influential American galleries and museums this decade. It is not that the artists are uninformed. All are knowledgeable, and all feel a real connection with postwar American art. But almost all of them trust other artistic traditions, particularly those of Africa and Asia, as much as if not more. With an

institutionalized art world that has had so little capacity or will to acknowledge what black artists have accomplished, it is easy to understand why.

Together these three exhibitions cut away some of the slickness of the current scene. And if many of these artists are involved in some kind of search for basics, there are undoubtedly plenty more. A shake-up is needed, and these shows suggest that it has begun.

LedisFlam Art in America

Women at War 1993

By Ruth Bass

This strong, provocative show brought together works by 18 women artists who have dealt with war in different ways. The title seemed to have a dual meaning. Some of the artists, particularly photographers Lee Miller, Margaret Bourke-White, and Susan Meiselas, were on the scene in war-torn areas recording specific incidents and allowing the viewer to provide the commentary. The majority of artists, however, have used their art as protest pieces in a personal war against war.

Sue Coe's powerful photoetching of an Iraqi mother trying to shield a child with her body, a direct response to the Gulf War, is pointedly titled *Bomb Shelter*. Mimi Smith's dress made of camouflage material trimmed with lace hangs below a sign that looks like needlepoint but reads: "Kill Level 1." The title of the piece, *To Die For*, echoed women's chatter about the clothes and ironically questions the justification for war: for motherhood and apple pie; the protection of innocent women and children; or perhaps for prosperity so that the survivors can buy more dresses.

Some artists derided war as a macho expression of masculinity. In *I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas*, Anita Steckel embellished a photograph of Adolf Hitler and several German soldiers standing near a banquet table with large, white penises ejaculating in arcs that resemble rocket trajectories. By contrast, **Deborah Masters** presented two monumental sculptures of helmeted heads with strangely androgynous faces. Here, women are at war in yet another way- present as the repressed feminine side of the male soldiers and, perhaps, as representatives of the larger society that ultimately makes the decision to send men to war.

PennState Harrisburg Currents, Fall 1990
“Sculpture Garden Receives an Angel”

It stands seven feet three inches high, an ominous figure. When you get closer it is apparent to see that its concrete arms are gently holding a small child. When you enter the rear, west entrance of the Olmsted Building you may meet the “Angel in Flight.”

“Angel in Flight,” sculpted by Deborah Masters, is a concrete, one dimensional statue that was accepted as part of Penn State Harrisburg’s Sculpture Garden. The Angel was a gift from Margaret Masters of Wormleysburg, the artist’s mother.

Much of Masters’ work is large and solemn and often has an ancient Egyptian or primitive African art style. Her subjects often deal with emotional events in life such as birth, babies, love, divorce, or the death of a loved one.

Masters, a native of the Harrisburg area, represents LedisFlamm Gallery of Brooklyn, New York. She holds a bachelor of fine arts degree in art/art history from Bryn Mawr College (1974). She has also studied at the New York Studio School of Painting, Drawing, and Sculpture. She worked in Rome for two years, where she worked exclusively in sculpture.

According to Masters, she was inspired to study art and sculpture by watching her father, a notable Harrisburg bridge architect, at work.

The Penn State Harrisburg Sculpture Garden currently features three works by Russian-born sculptor Dr. Boris Blai, founder of the Tyler School of Fine Arts at Temple University: “Evening Garment;” “Sea Girl;” and “In Green Pastures.”

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New York Times

April 1, 1988

By Michael Brenson

Blue Angel: The Decline of Sexual Stereotypes in Post-Feminist Sculpture

This traveling show sets out to “shatter the stereotype that feminism is in any way monolithic,” in the words of Juli Carson, who organized the show with Howard McCaleb. Its title comes from the film starring Marlene Dietrich, “whose sexual flaunting of man’s mythological woman” is seen by Ms. Carson as a “deconstruction of patriarchal values.” Once the exhibition declares that it is about the diversity of sculpture by women with roots in the feminist movement, however, the selections seem arbitrary. Choosing artists who, according to Ms. Carson, exemplify a “specific aspect of feminist-related sculpture” also gives the show a restricted quality that undermines its argument for the existence of a new kind of openness.

The high point in the show is the dialogue between Faith Ringgold’s “Three in a Bed” and Maren Hassinger’s “Blanket of Branches.” Ms. Ringgold fabricates and composes with small dolls. In “Three in a Bed,” a black woman is reading to her three children, who are listening in rapt attention while sharing a convertible bed with a teddy bear as big as any of them. It is a work of humor and flair in which everything, including the fabrication, scale and characterization, has a point. Ms. Ringgold pulls her blanket over the children; Ms. Hassinger pulls her blanket of twigs over the gallery, suspending it just below the ceiling. While Ms. Ringgold’s sculpture is taut and specific, Ms. Hassinger’s installation is generalized and expansive. It uses fragile natural forms to bring to the show a general urgency and calm.

The tension between general and specific may be the real subject of this show. **Deborah Masters’s** sculpture is one of several works with sexual and social stereotypes. It brings to mind the earthly, idealized women by Maillol. But Ms. Masters’s woman is heavy-set, and her Hydrocal seems not smoothly modeled but almost hacked into shape. The modesty of this different kind of woman is monumentalized by her large scale. The works on paper by Mary Ting are more abstract. They have a gentleness, spaciousness and calligraphic quality that suggests Chinese painting. But they are also filled with lines and shapes that are tough and cutting. The tension between something very specific and very general gives...

Gracie Mansion Gallery, Arts Magazine

“New York in Review”

By Robert Mahoney

Holzner’s urbanity and wit was needed at the Snug Harbor Sculpture Festival. This year’s event (through October 22) turned its back of the only strength of the site- the great old architecture- and scurried off into the bushes. Most of the sculptors could not see the trees for the bushes. In Lillian’s *Mirage*, tiny lead wedges create temples about yea-high, look like wickets, act like they’re surveying, and behave like lovers, catching and examining intimate emotions in the grass. This is sculpture about running ‘round back of the bushes and finding another world there. Ruth Hardinger is also running off to do something private behind the bushes. Inspired by the hydrangeas, she spreads out an organic ceramic chess set for new-agers to push around the lawn by the West Gate. Her forms go down the drain of a too recent good-riddancing of corny Chicago vaginal imagery, however, to bubble on the eye of my age group correctly. It makes one wobble and swoon: to think this old mushroom humanism might be sprouting up again. The deja-vu whirl does eventually resolve itself, during an inspection of slate piled deep down the flytrap, into something like whimsical bemusement. Lorenzo Pace was also expired (er, inspired) by the blossoms on the bushes. His *Walking Dead* is inadmissible; it is not public sculpture: it is private business taken out of doors. About the only alibi I can provide for this stone dressed up as Frankenstein’s bride is related to where sculptural thoughts of the dead normally belong. America, unlike France in its day, has no tradition of funerary sculpture. Sculptors can’t make a living getting these whimsical morbidities out of their systems anymore. It is true that a taste for angels weeping busts did ebttide back into Paris parks, and weaseled perhaps by reference to the background of busts in paintings by Watteau and Fragonard, busts were set like ghosts in the bushes of the Luxemburg gardens. Maybe this is what is happening here: but, actually, if this is what sculptors want, Liriam Bloom is a much better example. Her Hoolilou hid in the bushes, and has a form and posture derivative of funerary or garden whimsies. In it, a horse pushes out of a cocoonish boulder set on three small balls. This fair embryology is weathered, and has a touch of grandeur, or melancholy at its demise. I liked it. In the same vein, inside the gallery, **Deborah Masters** still impresses by her sturdy and healthy figural solemnity. But the sad thing is- and this lends pathos to the work- Masters should have been born in 1850 to get the most out of her career. May Ann Unger repeats the archetypal modernist abstraction of the figure by goring it out into the realm of expressionistic gut-wrenches. The self-absorption of those in pain is reinforced by the quaint blasé character of stained-glass scenes of lighthouses and ports in the gallery décor. Ralph Martel’s *Les Demoiselles* would have hung themselves on the obvious allusion of the title, had they not first got hung up and improved (drowned) by the decorative rigging of wheel and rope and anchor on the ceiling. Back outside, Jane Schneider is back in the bushes, doing something rather self-pleasuring only. The *Howling* sent me reeling again, hinting that that Boardwalk staple, driftwood sculpture, is coming back for a sequel. Dina Bursztyn’s *The Other Life of a Tree* suggests the train of thought that this type of work looks the way it does because it is just too darn sensitive

over the lost amenities at the Snug Harbor site. Her very toady, pretty whimsy, shining back of a lost tree limb by ceramic prosthesis, is so odd it attracts the ducks. I thought the wonderland whimsy looked even better with quacks piped in, but then realized the beggars were after food. Seeing this, I noted a tree stump, and another; a drinking fountain that had been removed; two cement legs but no bench: a crippled site, begging a healing platonic love by females. The lack of fountainhead at Snug Harbor also annually makes a look at this rusting pond one of the chief sculptural movements of a visit. A lot of sculpture tries to compete with that decaying utility. There were a lot of poles this year- in Nade Haley, in Jesse Moore, in Marc Gordon. Lift is good, but then there must be balance, and further lift. These raised works all looked nervous, once raised. Gregory Sale resists the poles, though he did use a windmill. The windmill dug in at its heels and created a dangerously stubborn object on and in the ground. To get a look at Sale's floppy blades as they kicked up plaster before a distant view of New York also gave off a wild sense of being out of control, of frustration at being so Snug, of dying to come like Jason to Manhattan and tear up the town. Complex energy gave Sale's work pulse-excitement. Finally, the best in the show was by Robert Ressler, who was more focused here than at Socrates. In *Bread and Water*, a mast-like shaft, a carved out canoe, a large ball, were mounted on castings that let them spin. One spin and these objects swept out through the trees and scenery and brought it all together.

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'Trails of Showing Sculpture in Park'

The Brooklyn Phoenix, 1988

On the Lullwater's northern bank stand two bare pedestals and the third lone survivor of **Deborah Masters'** "Three Pond Virgins," an ambitious series of classical figures inspired by Hadrian's Villa near Rome. Masters says she wanted to relate the classical figures to the landscape, including the Italian-style Boathouse, and to make time go away a bit. "It was a wonderful piece to make, and the most successful installation I've ever done; people really loved them," she says.

ALMOST FELL INTO POND

Masters set up the plaster molds on the site, and poured the bases on the spot. The figures were poured nearby, and the Brooklyn Forestry Division of the Parks Department helped out with the precision lifting for the installation when the exhibit opened in June.

"I almost fell into the pond, removing the molds," she laughs, recalling the set-up process. The piece was eventually vandalized, two of the virgins knocked off their pedestals and tossed into the pond. Now, only one remains. "It was pretty well-integrated," she says of the tri-part piece, concluding, "but it was a dangerous piece to make here" because of the vulnerability of the figures.

"Step One" has been plagued by vandalism right from the start, with problems ranging from graffiti to outright destruction and theft. "I designed these so they couldn't be pushed over," says Masters, tapping gently on the one remaining Virgin; the statue itself rests on a sturdy, ornamented column atop a poured concrete base. "But they must have had a sledge-hammer," she adds ruefully. The sculpture cost a few thousand dollars just to make, she says, but it is the emotional loss that is most damaging.

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Village Voice, March 9th, 1993

'Covert Action', Elizabeth Hess