

reviews

Contrasts: real and man-made art

Two new shows that opened Sunday at the University Museum of Art pose some problems about the role of art in an environment already over-populated with man-made objects. The shows, one including the four winners of Statewide Services' Traveling Exhibit Competition (in the main floor galleries) and the other comprised of woven sculpture by University graduate Mike Walsh (in the Focus Gallery upstairs), will run through February 25. They may be seen Tuesday through Sunday, 12 to 5 p.m.

It's good to bear in mind while viewing the exhibits from the Statewide Services Competition that one of the main objectives of the competition is to make good contemporary art available, through a circulating program, to areas outside the cultural centers of the Northwest. Think about how a fisherman from Astoria, a logger from Bend, or a secretary from Pendleton might look at each of the exhibits. It's not too difficult to guess what they'll like, or what they won't like.

Michael Ware's ink drawings, for instance, should be fairly popular. Limiting himself to black ink (usually applied with a brush) and white paper, Ware has been able to capture the elusive

atmosphere of the rain forests and dunes at the Coast. Considering the economy of means and similarity of format employed here, the effect is one of surprising variety. Texture is Ware's forte: fog, rain, water, clouds, sand, and the roots, branches, and leaves of trees each take on their own textural characteristics and are in this way sorted out of these tangled landscapes.

Michael Mathers' documentary photographs of the tramps he met while hitching freights for several months come off as pretty attractive, too. The men appear in their native environments here — in boxcars, in freightyards waiting to catch the next train, in camps and make-shift shacks, never far from the rails. Each photograph is accompanied by a quote from one of the characters Mathers has portrayed, and these provide much additional interest to the exhibit. The tramps and their language are equally colorful.

In her woven capes, masks, helmets, and ceremonial devices, Barbara Setsu Pickett harkens back to a time when there was little separation between art and life. Most of these pieces relate in varying degrees to Indian costumes or ritual objects from the tribal cultures of Africa or South America. For this reason, they often seem to invite the viewer to imagine himself wearing or using them in some sort of ritual, and this constitutes their distinctive attraction.

It's doubtful that, in contrast to the other three exhibits, very many people will be turned on by Eric Gronberg's ceramic work that shares a gallery with Pickett's weaving. Of course, these dismembered hands, feet, knees, legs, arms, torsos, buttocks and breasts lying randomly in red barkdust among oak leaves, branches, and stones evidence a master's touch in the use of materials. But technical proficiency can't save the piece from looking like a morbid sexual fantasy. Add to this the fact that the set in which the ceramics are situated, and without which it would seem incomplete, was concocted by the Museum staff and could probably not be duplicated elsewhere, and the difficulties overwhelm the work.

The problem with all the work in the Traveling

Exhibit show is that in one way or another fails to come to grips with the present, with the realities that the viewer confronts as soon as he steps out the door: Ware's ink drawings offer an escape into a landscape still untouched by man — an illusion. Mathers' disarmingly romantic photography assays the pathos of the tramp's life we all long from time to time to escape to. Pickett's woven pieces refer to an earlier, perhaps simpler stage of man's history. Gronberg, though his work is not quite as appealing, seems to suggest yet another fantasy, another antidote for reality.

Mike Walsh's woven sculpture in the Focus Gallery offers one solution to this problem. Walsh, in his own words, is dealing with "... ritual, organic, and paradoxical form and their relationship to the environment." The use of natural materials (jute, sisal, linen, feathers, wood, and paper) is throughout his work contrasted with man-made materials (plastic, rubber, chromed or rusted metal) and there's usually a lively dialogue going on between the contrasting elements.

Walsh isn't technically proficient in the way that the artist in the main galleries can be. Sometimes his pieces fall flat due to pretension or the craftsmanlike overkill of the plexiglass-and-wood boxes that encase some of them, but he more than compensates for these letdowns when he manages to fuse image with idea in pieces like "Attachmet (Sic) Future Development" and "Ceremonial-Fragment Tapestry." This latter work consists of some handmade jewelry and a small weaving encased (appropriately this time) as a mock museum exhibit and dated by the artist "circ. 1984." Though it doesn't come off as too didactic, it still makes a point.

At his best, Walsh goes beyond the limits of good craftsmanship and good taste, and speaks directly to the viewer about what it is to live in this time and place. In this way, art becomes not only pleasurable, but necessary.

Stephen Bangs

'Equivalent Prints' call for imaginative viewers

To Jerry Greenfield, the viewer of his photographs is just as important as the photograph itself. And if the viewer comes filled with imagination, he is assured a chance to share in the photographer's creativity. His part will be to complete the seemingly abstract image by being encouraged to formulate his own objects and ideas deduced from the presented visual stimulus.

A collection of Jerry Greenfield's black and white photographs from the past two years are on exhibition in the Photography Gallery at the University of Oregon Art Museum until the end of February. Through the help of Bernard Freemesser, teacher of photography in the Journalism Department at the University, this gallery has been established to provide a constantly changing photography exhibit to the people of Eugene.

After living in Oregon for 17 years and attending Pacific University in Forest Grove, Jerry Greenfield moved to the east coast in 1964, when he began studying under noted photographers Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind. Yet his greatest influence came from the teachings of Minor White. White believes, as does Siskind and Callahan, that the subject matter is secondary only to the photograph itself in creating a response. In explaining this trend in photography, he speaks of "Equivalence." Defined very simply, Equivalence is the theory that a photograph (or any other work of art) will go beyond the mere representation of a physical subject; it should mainly serve as a function or experience which will entice the viewer to relate it to something within himself, giving him a new stimulus to re-create a personal visual experience.

These examples of Jerry Greenfield's photography serve this same function of Equivalence. He has taken close-up

shots of naturally occurring phenomena such as rusted iron, curling paint, and

flaking metals. As pure designs, they may appear similar to the abstracted



What do you see in Greenfield's peeling paint?

forms found in many modern paintings. However, Greenfield has presented something distinctly different from abstract forms in his successful prints. Instead of using the painter's method of starting with a basic idea and then abstracting it into an often indistinguishable shape, Greenfield searches for an existing abstract form and then isolates it from the surroundings, thereby composing a specific design to act as a stimulus for our response.

This can most clearly be seen in the print in the far corner as one enters the gallery (none of the prints are titled on the wall). Looking only at the actual subject matter, it consists of a long, white stretch of paint that has curled up around the edges. Yet when viewed as an Equivalent, I can imagine the curving, sensual outline of the body belonging to a 1950's, Marilyn Monroe-type of beauty. True, this may not have been what Greenfield had in mind when he made the photograph, but I doubt he intended to merely represent an area of white paint before a dark background. By this theory of Equivalence, his original idea of the photograph can now be expanded to include other personal interpretations.

Although many photographers use and have used this style of a close-up, "isolated" view, Jerry Greenfield shows how it continues to be effective. This approach allows the camera to isolate a subject from its normal surroundings, and then causes the viewer to concentrate on the subject's new context. If the viewer uses his imagination to visualize a new form, he can leave the exhibit with some wonderful re-creations. I left very pleased. I had just visually formulated the majestic pose of Rodin's powerful statue of "Balzac," standing proud with his arms folded, before a starry night—all out of an area of broken rust and flaking metal.

David Turner