

The New York Times

Long Island Art, a Refuge From the Whirl

By Roberta Smith

August 1990

August comes but once a year to Long Island, and that may be as much as anyone can take. The frantic whirl of relaxation and hand-to-hand socializing fills the air, and the pesto intake skyrockets. For those who need a break from the work of not working, the area's museums are one option. They are generally cool, calm, a little underpopulated and, even better, the season's crop of summer exhibitions is unusually fine.

This weekend, art can be found in towns as far west as Roslyn Harbor, where Leo Castelli, the eminence grise of contemporary-art dealers, has organized a small survey of 1960's and 70's works at the Nassau County Museum of Art, and as far east as East Hampton. There, an important local gallery of the 1950's called Signa is being remembered in a joint exhibition at the Guild Hall Museum and the East Hampton Center for Contemporary Art. A show that takes the island's scenic beauty as its main subject is "20th-Century Long Island Landscape Painting," a two-part exhibition shared by the Heckscher Museum in Huntington and the Art Museum at Stony Brook.

Meanwhile, art more indigenous to the island of Manhattan is visible in "Half-Truths," an exhibition presenting some recent developments in contemporary sculpture at the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton. And in the small-gem category, an exceptional show at the Dia Art Foundation in Bridgehampton examines the slow and methodical path to maturity of Myron Stout, an abstract painter's abstract painter.

In Nassau County

Not surprisingly, Mr. Castelli's overview, "Two Decades of American Art: The 60's and 70's," which can be seen at the Nassau County Museum, centers primarily on the artists of his own New York City gallery. Since these artists include some of the major proponents of Pop, Minimal and Conceptual Art, a certain amount of postwar American art history is touched on, albeit of the great-man, blue-chip variety. Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, and Frank Stella and Donald Judd are represented here, if sometimes rather perfunctorily. A few non-Castelli inclusions, like Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland of the Color Field Painting school, broaden the perspective on the 60's.

Mr. Castelli excels at illuminating groupings: a Noland shaped canvas next to one of Warhol's big hammer and sickle images seem to be merely two sides of the same big, weightless 60's coin. A wall of Louise Nevelson's black boxes, full of mysterious wood fragments, gives a different tenor to the grids of Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt. But the show's biggest surprise is a 1959 painting by Ellsworth Kelly that replicates almost exactly Malevich's famous "Suprematist Composition: White on White," in the Museum of Modern Art. An act of homage that presages 80's appropriation, it's a wonderful discovery.

Island Landscapes

Long Island Landscape Painting: The 20th Century," at the Heckscher Museum in Huntington, and its slightly renamed companion exhibition, "20th-Century Long Island Landscape," at the Art Museum at Stony Brook, are occasioned by a book by Ronald G. Pisano that favors the first title. Together, they pay homage to the island's varied topography and flora - exceptionally beautiful at this time of year - and to the ways they have infiltrated the work of all kinds of painters, famous and not, contemporary and earlier.

Although scenes of pastoral beauty far outnumber those of urban grittiness, the art on view encompasses the island from end to end, sometimes with open vistas that no longer exist. Georgia O'Keeffe's "East River No. 3" of 1926 is a study in industrial grays and Lizbeth Mitty's "Attached and Semi-Attached" captures the festering energy of a residential street in Brooklyn or Queens. These are a far cry from Stokely Webster's Impressionist "Little Neck Bay," 1945, which includes a bridgeless Throgs Neck in the distance, or Paul Resika's Tuscan-flavored "View of Amagansett," 1959.

Sometimes the subjects are highly specific, as in Niles Spencer's 1950 rendition of a Sag Harbor landmark, "The Watch Factory." Sometimes painterly abandon supersedes description, as in Jim Dine's large-scale "Long Island Landscape," 1963, and Paul Georges's succulent, close-up "Roses" of 1981.

Several well-known habitues of the Long Island landscape are on hand, including Albert York, Jane Freilicher and Fairfield Porter, whose 1954 "Calverton" is all motion, from grass, to sky, to passing car. Lee Krasner's nearly abstract "Eyes in the Weeds" (1963) balances nature and culture with unwavering aplomb. But the exhibition is almost equally strong in artists with less familiar names. Margery Rutkowski's "Backyard Barn" (1988), Nicolai Cikovsky's "On the Sound" (1948), and Samuel Rothbort's "Rottkamp's Farm, Pear Tree in Bloom, Uniondale, Long Island" (1931) are but three examples.

A few klunkers from both the abstract and the realist camps mar the show, but its pros outweigh its cons. It sharpens one's appreciation of the island's abundant beauty, past and present, and the ways it has been transferred to canvas by generations of artists.

Southampton Hybrids

The Parrish Art Museum's "Half-Truths" downplays the natural in favor of the man-made, focusing on the work of six American and European artists who specialize in the sculptural hybrid. The work in the show, which has been organized by Marge Goldwater, director of the Isamu Noguchi Museum in Long Island City, Queens, occupies a fertile no man's land between use and uselessness, familiarity and strangeness, inviting interpretation and yet splitting it into multiple possibilities.

In nearly every case, the mind takes a sudden left or right turn on the way to understanding these objects. Granville Davey, a sculptor from England, simply makes an abbreviated version of a percussionist's drum and titles it "Rack," calling attention to the instrument's stretched skin in a discomfiting manner. Erik Levine's large pale wood forms are light in weight and delicate in surface and exude a kind of abstract purity, even as their shelllike or boltlike configurations bring to mind the shipyard or the mathematical model. And Jack Risley's mysterious forms, made primarily of black rubber or fabric, seem continually on the verge of inflating or deflating, expanding or contracting, to no explicit purpose, but in ways that seem latently sexual and also threatening.

Much of the work builds, often too obviously, on a Minimalist base using Pop Art banality and a Surrealist double edge to do so. Tony Tasset adds leather upholstery to strict Minimalist boxes and wedges, giving them an air of corporate luxe and poking fun at their radical intent. Ann Messner domesticates a rusty steel cube, such as Richard Serra might have used, with the addition of a circular washing machine door.

Only Robert Gober, Joel Otterson and Rosemarie Trockel transcend simple formal manipulation or amusing one-liners to arrive at half-truths of any depth. Mr. Gober's enigmatic domestic objects - in this case a fixtureless white sink and an awkward playpen, each clearly handmade - suggest abandoned and curiously abstract monuments to a lost innocence, both personal and collective.

In Mr. Otterson's "Devil/Jesus," a mahogany occasional table is overwhelmed by a towering, manic grid of copper plumbing pipe, a primitive, parasitical form that also possesses an ornate, Mozartean delicacy. Ms. Trockel's "Untitled (Pennsylvania Station)," which pairs an abbreviated stove with a slatted-wood crate containing a small but monstrous burned creature, pits function not against nonfunction, but malfunction, and by implication, malevolence. It is a haunting work that speaks of different levels of suffering - from the psychic death of the unhappy housewife, to the real deaths of the Holocaust.

In Bridgehampton

In completely different ways, two final exhibitions concern American abstract art in the 1950's, the heyday of Abstract Expressionism. At the Dia Art Foundation in Bridgehampton, a show of 15 typically small canvases from the late 1940's and early 50's shows how Myron Stout worked against the Abstract Expressionist grain. Instead, he pushed the straight-edged geometries of Neo-Plasticism into more pliant, organic silhouettes, fusing the abstract with the suggestion of a watchful human presence. At least, this is the feeling imparted by the white-on-black, shieldlike shape of "Aegis."

Stout took many tacks while honing in on paintings like "Aegis" and its equally powerful opposite number "Demeter" - a toothlike black shape on white with which it shares the final wall of the Dia exhibition. Sometimes he adhered to the perpendicular divisions of Mondrian, adding his own impure colors (pink and black, for example). Sometimes he broke loose with sharp-edged tumbling shapes suggestive of diving birds or blowing leaves. In the best of these early paintings, he breaks the surface into tiny units of color that radiate outward from a central spine, as if generated by some inner light. This is the effect that Stout ultimately condensed into the finely chiseled, hovering presences of his mature work.

East Hampton Salute

Finally, the 1950's road that was more, rather than less, traveled is retraced in East Hampton where "East Hampton Avant-Garde: A Salute to the Signa Gallery" has filled almost to overflowing both the Guild Hall and the East Hampton Center for Contemporary Art. The Signa Gallery, founded and run by artists (foremost among them, Alfonse Ossorio, John Little and Elizabeth Parker), flourished from 1957 to 1960 as the hub of the East End art scene. It seems to have exhibited the work of nearly everyone who was anyone, artistically speaking, and who lived year-round or part time in the East Hampton area. In addition, frequent invitational exhibitions cast a wider net.

Of course, this show is much more than the history of an art gallery. Including more than 50 works, it encapsulates a time, a place and a style in a way that leaves the great-man, blue-chip approach to art history lying in the dust. Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Philip Guston and Lee Krasner are here, as are James Brooks, Grace Hartigan, Larry Rivers, Jean Dubuffet and Lucio Fontana. But so are exceptional paintings by Buffie Johnson and **Horia Damian** and many more, including the gallery's founders.

Helen Harrison, the exhibition's organizer, has made sure to include only paintings actually exhibited at Signa, which gives the proceedings a special ring of truth and makes especially pertinent the many photographs of gallery shows included in her detailed catalogue. All told, "East Hampton Avant-Garde" demonstrates the breadth and depth of the Abstract Expressionist style and influence through the simple force of raw fact rather than filtered history.

A version of this review appears in print on August 24, 1990, on Page C00022 of the National edition with the headline: Review/Art; Long Island Art, a Refuge From the Whirl.