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Reviews

Dresses make the women at SECCA



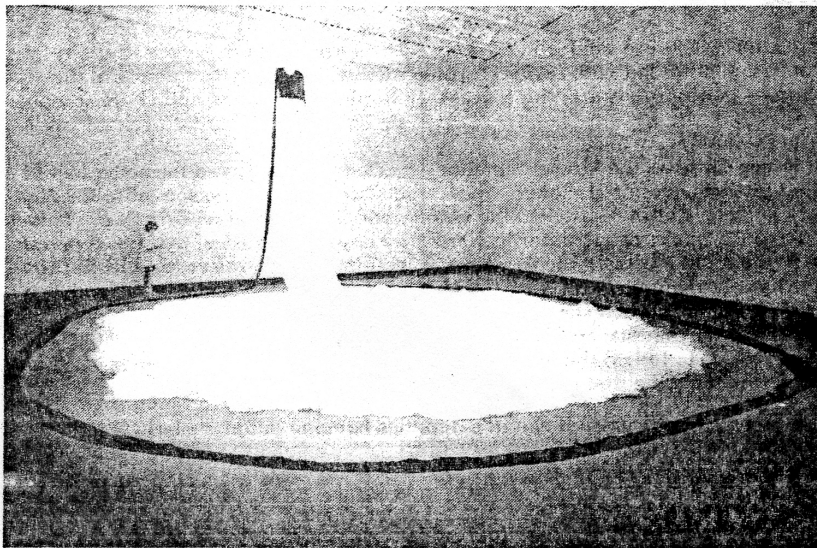
Classical
Margaret Shearin

Cascades of dark blue velvet and pale organza greet visitors who enter the Ted Potter Gallery at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem. In an exhibition that features only five works, Beverly Semmes has sewn together some unusual examples

of women's clothing. The giantess-sized gowns, ranging from evening gowns to a simple house dress, present viewers with the paradox of presence and emptiness. Like vacant shells, the garments hang on the wall, but they also are monolithic things that say much about the people absent from them.

Curator Jeff Fleming writes that Semmes primarily addresses feminist issues such as role stereotyping, but Semmes' work is not the sort of harsh, in-your-face political stancing that begrudges its audience a pleasurable viewing experience. As simple a concept as hanging a dress on the wall might be, the pieces do much to beguile the visual and tactile senses. One gets the feeling that exploring aesthetic potential is not only not contradictory to Semmes' goals, but an essential part of reaching them.

The dominant work in the show is "Yellow Pool," the evening dress made of blue velvet and off-white organza. It appears to be roughly 25' tall. The sleeves extend far past the normal length of human arms, down to the floor and out over it in a large oval line that connects with itself. From the waist down, filmy organza hangs to the floor where it laps over the carpet in a sea of frothy, egg-white tinted material, all contained by the sleeves. The sheer tactile luxuriousness of the materials is fascinating; in such abundance it takes on connotations different yet connected with the feminine garment. Its shape, color and texture



"YELLOW POOL" BY BEVERLY SEMMES

suggest a large egg full of potent life-giving material.

Semmes' handling of her materials is neither heavy-handed nor limited to a narrow range of interpretations. One might admire "Yellow Pool" as a visually tantalizing salute to female archetypes and female fertility. But if followed through, this thought might lead to questioning why this is the most persistent way of dealing with woman as a subject in the history of art — it's as if all those male artists just couldn't get around sexual attractiveness and fertility as the main characteristics of women.

In the upstairs extension of the main gallery are three more works. Only "House Dress" — a wide boxy gown made out of some shiny, printed material — clearly calls to mind a singular and limited female role as a home-bound housewife. Yet the work also conjures up the comforting, sheltering aspects of that role in a way that does not insult them. Another piece, made of crushed black velvet, is "Black Doorway." Its long sleeves reach to the floor, and it does indeed suggest mourning and death, and that women in some cultures have traditionally been the ones to prepare dead bodies for burial.

Semmes' dresses invite lingering con-

templation because they are visual attractive. She seems to use the knowledge that the longer a person is tempted to contemplate a work of art, the more sinks in — with all its implications.

This exhibition will be on display through July 17.

Margaret Shearin lives in Winston-Salem.