

# The New York Times

## ART; Exercising the Mind as Well as the Eye

By VIVIEN RAYNOR

Published: August 13, 1989

**TRENTON**— IN their revolt against tradition, Modernists took their cues from art by the uncivilized, the unformed and the deranged - "natural" man, in a word.

But the battle was lost as soon as it was won, with even Dada, the movement aimed at destroying art, becoming an inspiration for making still more of it. Probably because the avant-garde has become the academy, there still exists a desire for the unspoiled and, conflicting with it, a need to institutionalize it.

"A Density of Passions," at the State Museum here, is an interesting manifestation of this conflict, a deliberate merger of the self-taught with those who know the ropes but, consciously or not, choose to ignore them. The exhibition, which was organized by the museum's assistant curator, Alison Weld, and is the first in the series called "Contemporary Art: The New Jersey Context," seems to challenge its observers to spot the difference between the two and at the same time show cause as to why they should not be treated as equals.

In a catalogue, Ms. Weld classifies the 15 protagonists as, variously, visionaries, self-taught artists and non-mainstream artists or simply as artists. But while she avoids the all-purpose term "outsiders," she proposes that they have in common obsessiveness and a view of art as catharsis - characteristics that hardly separate them from conventional artists.

It is hard not to fuss with these categories, for they beset even the visitor playing the show by eye. Take the works of Judith Robertson - a store dummy covered with mother-of-pearl buttons, two bathroom sinks decorated with colored mosaic and the image of a swaybacked horse etched on a mirror and inlaid into a mosaic table. They shriek art-world sophistication, particularly the sink titled "Greetings From Florida" (irony that would not occur to an outsider) and the steed that resembles the personal emblem of the painter Susan Rothenburg.

The same goes for the installation by Stella Waitzkin, down to its title, "Details of a Lost Library." A few of Ms. Waitzkin's books are real, but most are fakes cast in marble dust and polystyrene. They repose on shelves, some with covers ornamented by different colored versions of the same pastoral relief, and are accompanied by cigar boxes containing casts of a female face and other miscellaneous bric-a-brac. Perceiving her living room as a symbol for the last 30 years of her life, the artist has, in effect, transferred it to the museum, preserved in a kind of aspic.

While this show is not a Garden of Eden, such art looks like the all-knowing serpent when compared with the pen and ink heads by Ted Gordon and Gerald Hawk's objects covered with matchsticks. Using pen and mostly black ink, Mr. Gordon models every facial form with fine stripes that are themselves modeled by even finer stripes. "Emperor Psychosis I - Ward Six" is typical of these gargoyles, the tracery of whose greatly enlarged eyes resembles that of stained-glass windows.

Raynor, Vivien. "ART; Exercising the Mind as Well as the Eye," *New York Times*, 13 August 1989.

Mr. Hawks lays his used wood matches end to end on three-dimensional forms that, presumably, were ready-made, as well as on flat surfaces, heightening the results with dyes applied in sparse patterns. This is beautiful, superbly finished work with more than a touch of the tribal.

Painting chairs, tables and mats with patterns reminiscent of Art Deco, Dennis Lick may be Mr. Hawks's equal as an alchemist-craftsman, but he does not project the same heaven-sent intensity. Nevertheless, the mixture of chic and eccentricity in his "furnished room" is irresistible and unforgettable.

The Buckminster Fuller of the naive world, Howard Finster is represented by early, less garrulous works. One is "The World's Greatest Riddle," a television set smashed and the hole stuffed with aluminum foil, newspaper pictures of the young man and a handwritten statement that begins "I changed a thing to a different thing from the thing the thing was." Another is a kerosene lamp sporting an electric bulb - a somewhat phallic object despite the myriad faces and angel-like figures painted all over it.

Frank Jones's drawings in blue and red crayon suggest small quilts embroidered with fanciful houses, with the frames wreathed with spiky foliage and smiling devils. Also present are: Joseph Yoakum, with his lovely geographical fantasies; the Philadelphia Wireman, whose fetish-like bundles of trash wrapped in wire were found in a Dumpster in the Philadelphia ghetto, and William Asman, a New Jersey artist who specializes in smiling Byzantine figures with stippled flesh and clothes that are a riot of geometrical patterns - all exquisitely executed in colored, gold and black inks.

Still, it is the tiny, Klee-like abstractions and "spirit figures" of Gregory Van Maanen that most subvert notions about high art. They mark the point where the "inner necessity" of the "natural" blends into the esthetics of the sophisticated.

*A beautifully installed show, it remains to exercise the mind as well as the eye through Sept. 24. The museum, at 205 West State Street, is open Tuesday through Saturday from 9 A.M. to 4:45 P.M. and Sunday from 1 to 5 P.M.*