

Annual Juried Exhibition '82

THE QUEENS MUSEUM

Introduction

I grew up in Queens, halfway, as I later found out, between Reuben Nakian's College Point home and Joseph Cornell's garage-studio on Utopia Parkway. So I think I know it pretty well. That particular street name—Utopia Parkway—seemed pre-ordained for an artist-dreamer like Cornell fashioning Metropolitan Museum art out of junk from the Whitestone dime store. It encapsulates the spirit of Queens for me. Not regal, but surrounded by gilt furnishings and full of vague dreams of glory, the Queens resident, like Walt Disney's Cinderella, is forever gazing out of narrow windows at the sparkling fairyland palaces of Manhattan's distant skyline.

Garage studios, basement workshops; easels in the kitchen, worktables in the bedroom; backyards full of sculpture, closets full of watercolors — except for those in P.S. 1 and I.S. 1, not one artist I visited for the jurying of the Queens Annual had working conditions equal to those of the average Manhattan loft dweller. Working against the confines of low ceilings, small rooms, direct or poor light, amid the clutter of “real” life, all of these artists are constantly aware of the difficulties they must surmount to produce art. Their drive, their dreams of glory, have to be intense.

Having grown up initially ignorant of art, except for a rare trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art with my folks, I faced the prospect of finding fifteen to twenty good artists in my home borough with curiosity and not a little trepidation, despite nearly twenty years involvement with the New York art world. The Queens Annual is unique in that the juror visits each artist's workplace to make the final decision on inclusion and to select the fairest works that will be shown. While this is probably the fairest system, and it allows for greater flexibility than simply choosing the artists and leaving to them the selection of what works will be shown, it is an emotionally and physically draining experience for the juror, and, most certainly, for the prospective artist. Obviously the impersonality of the average loft set-up (half-factory, half-gallery) provides a more formal and distanced situation than bedroom, basement or kitchen viewing. Then too, art critics are a shy lot, tending to be ill at ease in one-to-one confrontations with a person rather than a typewriter. (Many of us still try to slip through gallery shows anonymously even after years of reviewing.) The artist—naturally anxious to be included in the show, worried that the work won't look good enough, and nervous about

how to make the personally unknown, but known-of, juror comfortable—has even more reason to be uneasy.

The only artists who are eliminated in the studio visits are the ones whose actual works are inferior to their slides, and those who have *only* the works in the slides—that is, not a real body of work from which to choose the best of the most recent pieces. All the others not in the Annual were either eliminated ahead of time by not submitting — famous artists like Romare Bearden and Isamu Noguchi who work in Queens would naturally appear only in invitational situations — or were eliminated in the slide viewing. There the juror weeds out all the undeveloped, naive, student, and weekend art workers as well as those doing commercially oriented works. The aim is to include only professional (that is, committed, full-time) artists with relatively established careers. High quality film, video, and performance art was not (and often is not, to the profound disappointment of the museum staff) submitted in any significant amount, nor was there as much photography as one might expect. I was particularly unhappy about the tiny number of minority artists submitting, given the borough's institutional resources and the many densely ethnic communities in Queens. Finally, only one artist from P.S. 1, many of whose artists live in Manhattan, submitted, which is unusual and unfortunate, but at least the scales weren't falsely tipped as a result.

Houston Conwill, the sole P.S. 1 artist, whose studio there has been turned into a semi-permanent installation, has taken this opportunity to construct an installation he has long wanted to execute in New York. Its wall-buried time capsules containing spiritual messages from the past to the future relate to an outdoor piece he did in Atlanta two years ago in which the capsules had literally been buried in the earth. Robert Segall's piece is also specific to its site; it is a version of one he has proposed for the little plaza in front of the Flushing Library. Ricky Richardson's multi-partite piece can also be considered an installation work involving as it does ambient space. Outside of the tight confines of her I.S. 1 studio, the work can be seen to full advantage. We also deliberately decided to recreate the studio set-up of Gilles Jean Giuntini's wood and plaster “ghost ship” adjacent to a drawing for a lead version of it because the linear activity in the “water” clarifies the meaning of the jagged contours around the ship.

The playfully false impression of habitability created by Richardson's "teepees" is akin to Gary Kulak's un-sit-on-able chairs (despite their rugged steel construction), Kiyoko's unwearable garment shells that seem like classical drapery frozen in mid-gesture, and Susan Ruth Cohen's glued-down, flattened, painted, collaged-on clothing. In all of these works, and to a certain extent in Giuntini's ship, human presence is implied.

The two aspects of photography included in this Annual represent both poles of the art form, and of life in Queens. Julio Nazario's photographs have the cool formality we associate with the legacy of Paul Strand, whereas the collaborative efforts of Eduardo del Valle and Mirta Gomez are fine examples of the framed fragment style pioneered by Cartier Bresson and Robert Frank. Nazario finds beauty in the simplest suburban settings, while del Valle and Gomez locate that midpoint between caring humanism and the grotesque gilt 'n black marble sham opulence that seems so quintessentially "Queens" to me.

Sue Kwak Gross reveals her Asiatic heritage clearly in her atmospheric abstractions, but Pat Hammerman's paper-paintings and Betty Perez's fragmented grids carry feminist implications while remaining resolutely formal. Nickzad Nodjoumi paints with passion, but without journalistic specificity, about the political situation in his native Iran, juxtaposing images of murder and mutilation with allusions to Islamic calligraphy and Persian miniatures. The mix is surprisingly assimilable, perhaps in part because of the large scale and breadth of his handling. The situation is exactly opposite for Steve Sherman, whose tonal, painterly pictures of existential "man" afloat in the primordial sea, or on the brink of taking the plunge, tend to be (with the notable exception of the canvas in the show) more effective on a very small scale.

Dennis D'Amelio's perfect and minute Corot-like views of Manhattan and Long Island City, painted on the spot without the aid of photographs, have a very poignant atmosphere which reminds me of my youthful gazings at "the City" from my dining room window in Whitestone. In fact, the whole experience of jurying this Annual has brought back so many memories for me that I've been suffused with nostalgia for my own history. It has also been something of a revelation for me to discover so much talent in

my old home county. Growing up in Queens today, with a real museum in one's backyard, and shows like this to give one confidence in the fertility of the artistic plain that probably began as the Queen's lea, must be a very different and much more bracing experience for a youngster today than it ever was before.

—APRIL KINGSLEY