

JULY/AUG 1984

A Bronze Sampler

Six in Bronze/Carnegie Museum of Art/Pittsburgh/12 May - 8 June/
Columbus Museum of Art/
18 August - 30 September

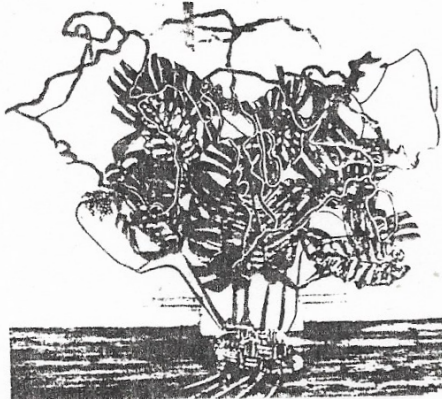
By John H. White

I am continually amazed by the relentless variety of categories within which curators place art. I know that someday I will get to curate a show entitled *Fifteen Artists that Have Never Traveled More Than One Hundred Miles from Their Home Towns*.

The show at hand is *Six in Bronze* (Nancy Graves, George Segal, Anthony Caro, Sandro Chia, Issac Witkin and Bryan Hunt). The package here is a safe one that lives and dies on its ability to show us how the role of bronze has been expanded to fit new attitudes and ideas in art. The show would have been more rewarding, however, had it covered a wider range of images and ideas.

George Segal is represented by *Gay Liberation*. The work is vintage Segal with white universal figures engaged in common scenarios. Segal uses bronze as an expedient material to defend his figures against rain, dogs, and kids. A white patina keeps the bronze figures looking like their former plaster selves. This mimicry, bronze imitating plaster imitating people, is reminiscent of paintings imitating photographs imitating people. Segal's use of bronze relates more directly to bronze as a commodity than to an expansion of the medium into new areas of art.

In direct opposition to this approach is Nancy Graves's work, in which the process by which the materials affect the image is readily apparent. The beautifully cast, organic forms and vibrant patinas carry our interest through various interactions and meanings. *Fayum-re* is a tangled web of cast forms that spread out from a single foot-like pedestal. Initially, the work appears as a festive but confusing mass, but competition between natural shapes



Nancy Graves, *Fayum-re*, 1982, Bronze, cast, with polychrome patina, 77 1/2" x 78" x 57".

and synthesized forms, planar groupings and linear tracings, and patinas and neighboring patinas work to make the sculpture vibrate. Looking at *Fayum-re* is like a walk through the woods, scan competing with detail and detail competing with scan.

Caro shares Graves's interest in casting found forms. Caro's forms, unlike Graves's, are construction materials which, after casting, he welds together into sculptures that are concerned with weight and structure. The alluring quality of Caro's work is that the completed structures do not read immediately as bronze. I imagine this is because the original elements never lose the presence of their original form.

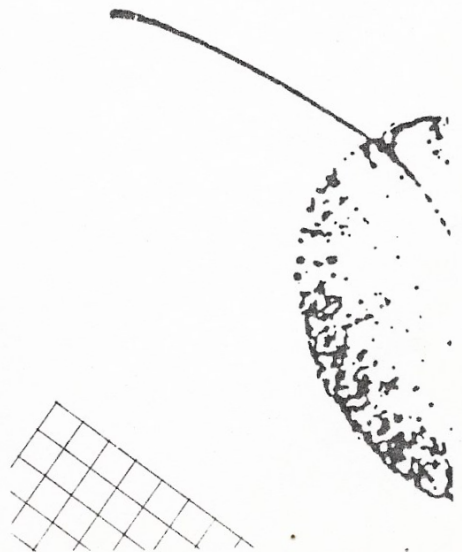
Witkin and Hunt are both represented in the show with cast bronzes. Although their works are not the same in form or intent, they come close enough that the inclusion of both artists limits the spread of the show's concerns. Hunt's works come across as being more closely related to the process of bronze casting, moving fluids caught in time. *Portrait-1982* succeeds in providing several stages of fluids in motion while simultaneously presenting itself as a unified field. The work is most forceful in its formal properties and in its ability to hold and transform the surrounding space. Witkin's *Tempest* is comprised of flat forms that cling together in anxious anticipation. The work appears transient, poised in a state that will change momentarily. Witkin's patinas are

beautiful surfaces that heighten the ethereal quality of this work.

Sandro Chia's works are the most firmly planted in the concerns of traditional bronze sculpture, cast heroic figures. *Boy with Ram* is a painted bronze that depicts two brick columns merging into the struggle between a ram and a male figure. There is something in this work with which I do not sympathize. All of the struggles depicted, figures from brick, male with ram, and paint on bronze seem as vapid as the stare on the boy's face.

This show needs to be aired out. Although most of the work is quite good and respectable, it is also predictable. The viewer really approaches this work as self-contained, human-scaled objects. I would have retained the work of Graves and Hunt and purged the rest of the show. Perhaps throwing in Joel Shapiro, Robert Graham, and maybe some guy that works in the foundry making stuff in his spare time. (The compulsive type who's been shaving bronze doors into three-foot piles of debris.)

John H. White is an artist and freelance writer living in Pittsburgh.



Continuing the American Folk Tradition

Artiture, Furniture of the 80s/Pittsburgh Center for the Arts/3 March - 8 April

By John H. White

The exhibition *Artiture, Furniture of the 80s* is most conspicuous for what it is, rather than for how it is billed. It is a selection of beautiful, handmade objects that use the theme of furniture as their point of departure. All of the structures are wooden and most of them draw on humor, Americana or recent historical styles to deliver their punch. The most successful pieces play upon the pre-conceptions that we bring to furniture.

The exhibit unfortunately attempts to illustrate two rallying points: a return to humanism in art, architecture, and design and an equivocation of the art/craft and art/design rub. These issues are raised about as valiantly as I raise a 7 a.m. cup of coffee. The pretense that the show is a bridge between art, craft and design is a weak structure on which to ride the work. Any show that wishes to accomplish this needs to open itself up to a wider spectrum of questions, processes, and materials. This work is too readable, too tame, and too traditional to fill this slot. As for the return to humanism, if this is true, then from this show we would have to conclude that humanity's fundamental concerns are for exquisite craftsmanship, self-indulgent wit, and disjunctive surface decoration. If these are our only concerns, then we have some problems on our hands.

The works and the artists' motivations are less pretentious than these unfulfilled issues. Trent Whittington's *Hall Piece with Mirror* is a tall, slender structure reminiscent, in color and surface, of a 40s refrigerator or an old Nash. The viewer is thrown back to

Fred and Ginger only to be retrieved in the nick of time. The saviors, two Jaguars (metal hood ornaments) flanking the side mirror from a Harley, place the viewer in the role of biker posing as jaded general. The sculpture becomes a vehicle for a dual fantasy: sophisticated socialite and rambunctious nomad.

Two works that draw heavily on the American folk tradition are Jim Fawcett's *Front Hall Gondola* and Tommy Simpson's *Rocker Brown and His Stool Tide*. Both pieces use the chair as narrator or storyteller as well as a vehicle for role playing. Fawcett refers to the past through the gondola's loom-like structure and needlepoint seat (by Martha Wemmer). Here is an apparatus that invites us to sit and be transported on a fantasy balloon ride. The artist provides us with sandbags and ropes to enrich the voyage. And so that we don't miss the point, the pillow with its idyllic country scene tells us what to expect and provides us with a cushion on which to expect it.

Simpson's piece provides an American setting with his rocker (*Rocker Brown*) and sidekick (*Stool Tide*) both adorned with a depression art, painted narrative. The form/content matrix is enhanced by the artist's use of asymmetrical supports. These supports form a folksy collage that metaphorically refer to the democratic history of the work. We are left with the rhetorical question — Did the chair evolve from a classical form? or Were the struts gathered from the side of the road, like hitchhikers, to form into this singular American story . . . Told by *Rocker Brown* . . . and his stool *Tide*?

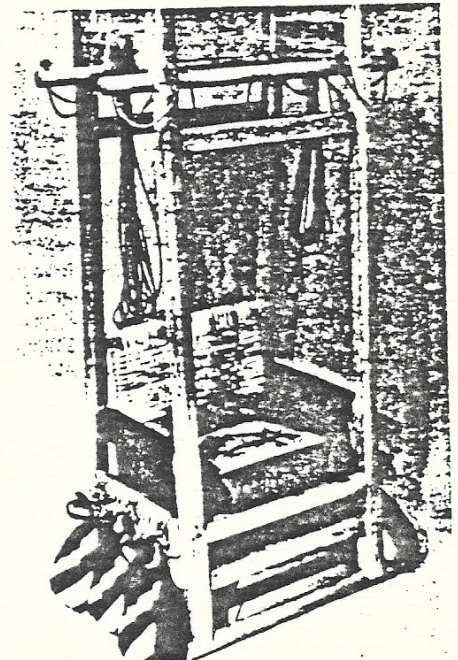
One of the outstanding pieces in the show was Judy McKie's *Table with Dogs*. The table has an oval glass top which is supported on the heads and tails of twin wooden dogs. The work makes reference to several styles. The dogs' tails appear to have risen out of the 20s; the dogs look as if their cousins have jobs working in neo-expressionist paintings. The work in total has the elegance of Egyptian statuary, yet the bones in the dogs

mouths bring us back to good old American funk.

Two pieces that were difficult to assimilate into the theme of the show were Robert Costa's *Chapel of Dreams* and Steve Masden's *Midnight Flight*. Costa's work opens up another area of thought, altar pieces, and Masden's piece plays less on being furniture and more on being a decorative object.

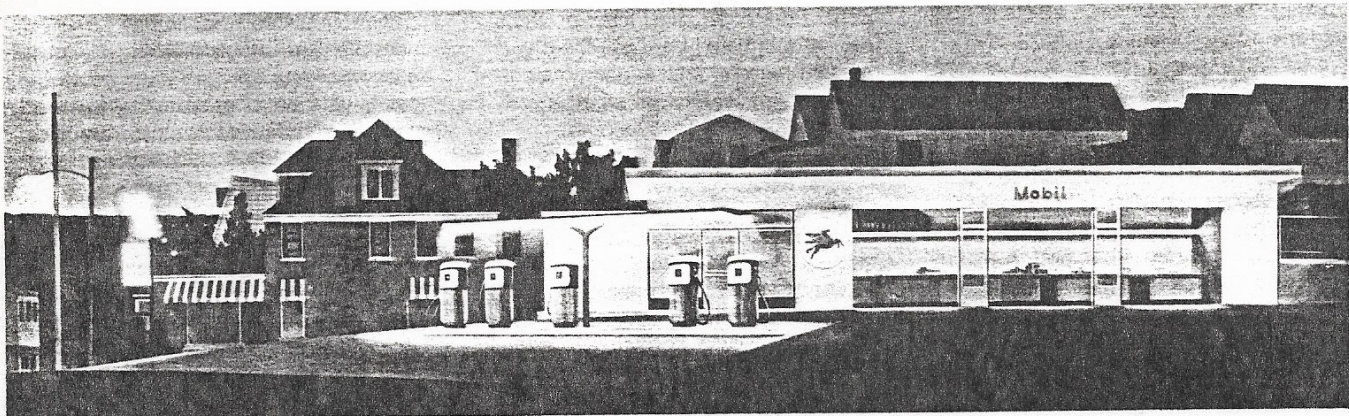
The show was co-curated by Sande Deitch, Director of Exhibitions and Programs, Pittsburgh Center for the Arts and Judy Coady, Director, The Gallery of Workbench.

John H. White is an artist and teacher living in Pittsburgh.



Jim Fawcett, *Front Hall Gondola*, spruce, beech, locust, ash, rope, cotton, sand, 68" x 37" x 24".
Photo: Bob Barrett.

SEPT/OCT 1984



Raymond DeFazio, *Island Avenue*, 22½ x 73 inches, Westmoreland County Museum of Art.

Stamps Of Approval: Pittsburgh Curators

By John H. White

The following excerpts result from interviews held with the curators of three Pittsburgh arts organizations. In an effort to avoid unwarranted posturing, I have let the curators speak for themselves.

John Caldwell, Adjunct Curator of Contemporary Art, The Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute.

A museum's educational function is fulfilled with a museum's effect on the artists in the city. I feel that the quality of the permanent collection is the most important aid this museum can give the artists. The Museum of Modern Art educated de Kooning and Newman. If we secure the kind of collection of recent work that I hope to develop over the next five years, you will be able to see better work from this period at the Carnegie than you will be able to see in New York.

Second, we are open to making this museum as lively and active as possible. The present show *Seven New Artists: Pittsburgh Today* helps do this. The museum has a real responsibility to the art community. We used to have

one-person shows in the entrance gallery. My perception, when I came here was that those shows were ignored by the people that write and care about art. One of the reasons for doing a larger show with more people was to break that pattern so that more people would pay attention to the work. The opportunity that we have provided is to give exhibition space that is large, shows the work in a favorable light, and places the work before a much wider audience. Most of the artists in the show have shown elsewhere, and yet I ran into a lot of people at the opening who had never seen this work.

Of the artists in the show we already own work by two, Kathleen Montgomery and Peter Stanick. We also have bought from previous shows of the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh's Annual at the Museum. This work is kept along with other museum purchases and will most likely be put into a recent acquisitions show. I think that my second purchase for the museum was a Kathy Montgomery drawing. It wasn't because she was a local, rather it was because I liked the drawing. Museums that have policies against buying work by local artists have them as a way of dealing with community pressure. If Frank Stella moved to town, you can believe that they'd think about obtaining one of his works. Most museum purchases are made on an ad hoc basis. They are not

made through any given policy, because any such policy would be ultimately stupid. Works of art speak for themselves.

Barbara Luderowski, Director
The Mattress Factory
Michael Oljnyk, Adjunct Curator of Exhibitions, The Mattress Factory

What makes the Mattress Factory unique is that we specialize in installation and performance art. When we started, there wasn't a lot of work in these areas done in Pittsburgh. Since we started these forms have gained more credibility. Beyond that, the Mattress Factory is run by artists who have a feeling for the profession. Our success comes down to our being more sensitive to the artist's point of view and to his/her needs. A museum might be concerned with the integrity of its space, keeping the walls clean, etc., rather than with the work itself. We are less concerned with the architecture than with the art. This allows us to be less afraid and more willing to take a chance. Often, a museum wants to know exactly what an artist is going to do. We, on the other hand, have taken people that have never done an installation, and given them an opportunity.

We are not exclusively a local arts organization; we are looking for anything and everything in the way of

talent. To talk about area artists is poor terminology. It's like the term "local artist": it's always such a put down. We are saying that the artists from this city aren't any different from artists anywhere else. You either are an artist or you aren't, and it doesn't matter where the hell you come from. If we could find all of the work that we needed in Pittsburgh, then we would do that, but it just isn't out there. It seems that every town is the same. We recently were in New York and could find only one thing that we wanted to show. Geography and proximity are not criteria.

We do not purchase work per se. As a matter of fact, we do have a Michael Morrill and a James Turrell, but these were acquired through trades. When we build our addition, we hope to exhibit work that we have collected. With an installation, as in Turrell's case, we have purchased drawings and specifications as to how it is to be erected. We can then use these materials to construct the work elsewhere.

A basic concern behind all of the installations that we exhibit is to provide an artist's fee above and beyond a materials fee. Basically we don't feel that artists should be used, their work exhibited without compensation. What we pay is not a great amount, but it is compensation.

Bill Judson, Curator of Film and Video, The Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute.

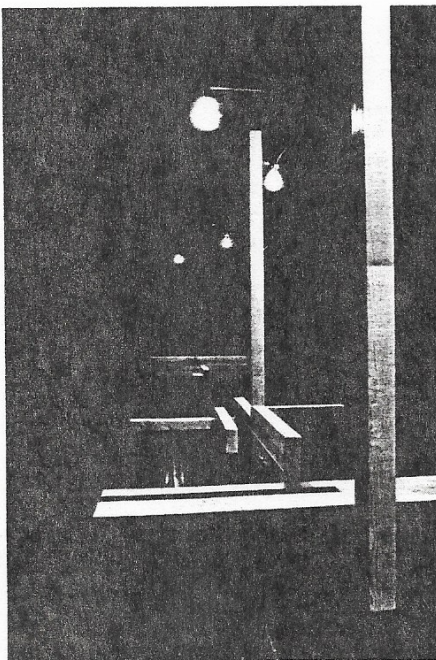
One concern that the film department shares with the contemporary section is the need to exhibit artists from the area. Over the years we've shown a number of Pittsburgh artists: Roger Jacoby, Victor Grauer, David Lee, Paul Glabicki, Bob Gaylor, and Tony Buba. I don't want an artist to have a meaningless show. It should represent some sort of achievement; it is truly exciting when the work is strong enough to say "Let's do it now!"

I get in touch with artists in a variety of ways. For example, I serve on panels: if I see a work that is particularly strong, I will follow up by calling the artist. People also solicit me. In these

cases I prefer an initial letter or phone call. At that point, I will ask them to present the work and support materials (reviews, grants, etc.) at an arranged time.

We are also involved with acquiring films and especially videotapes. There is a woman, Cecelia Condit from Cleveland, who does great stuff. I happened onto her work and since have bought two of her tapes. Subsequently, I got her in touch with the people at the Three Rivers' Arts Festival, and she won a prize. These works can be seen at any time in our screening room. In addition, we have a video room set up in the main galleries, and we have frequent public screenings of the films in our collection.

The advocacy process in the film section of the museum is different, because the public has no concept of what an experimental film is; what is needed is a basic education and a system of distribution. This is a crucial part of my curatorial responsibility.



Michael Morrill, installation, the Mattress Factory, Sept. - Oct. 1983. Photo: Barbara Runnette.

There is also a whole area of involvement that I have outside of the museum. Part of my job description states that I will spend a certain part of my time with outside groups. I am involved with OVRMAC (Ohio Valley Region Media Arts Coalition), an advocacy organization run by artists and based in Columbus. I helped to start the group, and I presently provide it with the resources of the museum. I am also involved with the Pittsburgh Filmmakers and with the publication of the Videomakers' Travel Sheet. The travel sheet lets video makers know who will be presenting work and where.

Dr. Paul Chew, Director, The Westmoreland County Museum of Art

We organize our exhibits to appeal to a regional audience. Our museum serves the community with our collection, the exhibitions, an art library, a film series, and some concerts. One of our major efforts is to develop our Southwestern Pennsylvania Painting and Sculpture Collection.

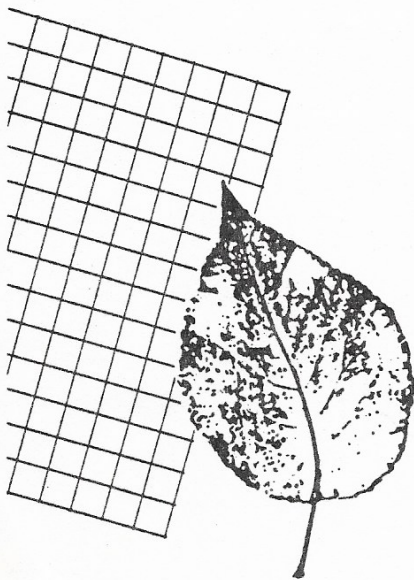
We exhibit a wide range from traditional to current work. I also try to arrange shows that reflect a variety of styles, as in our recent show, *The Figure in Contemporary Art*. Of course, any cross section of the public will not digest everything that you give them. They will be very critical at first. Our audience has grown with the museum.

Since I have been director, I have made it a point that this museum would be attentive to living artists and would help them by exhibiting and purchasing their work and also by directing them to galleries. I think that a regional museum must pay attention to area artists. I would never turn down a request to look at someone's work. If asked, I would give an opinion, and if the artist asked for a show, I would seriously consider it, and more often than not, I would give him/her one.

We have purchase funds we use to acquire work from the annual Associated Artists' of Pittsburgh show. We have been doing that for twenty five years now, and all of these works are in our collection. We also purchase annually from our *Regional Invitational*. All of these works are shown in the museum at least once a year, although they do not hang in the permanent collection. We feel that we can show much more than we can purchase. By doing this, we give a great deal of exposure to Southwestern Pennsylvania artists.

The work that we exhibit differs somewhat from the work that we purchase. For example, we exhibited an installation by Anne Elliot recently — a tremendous installation in which she painted all of the walls black and hung enormous pieces of paper. There was no way that we could purchase this work. We normally purchase prints, drawings, paintings, and crafts but these works could be very avant-garde. Now we did have an installation by Delbert Highlands a few years back and subsequently purchased a drawing by him.

John H. White is an artist and freelance writer who lives in Pittsburgh.



Survey of Curating In The Region

In order to elicit responses from major, public institutions throughout the region, questionnaires were sent to either the institutions' directors or the curators of contemporary art. A total of 12 institutions were surveyed; 7 responses were received. The sampling of institutions excluded all university and college galleries.

The survey was undertaken for one simple reason: to hear directly from these institutions what their stance toward regional art was. Over the years there has been substantial criticism of the region's major institutions for a lack of concern with regard to contemporary, regional art. We hope that the results of this survey and the issues it raises will precipitate an examination of curatorial policies by Dialogue readers.

The Questions

1. What percentage of exhibitions at your institution is curated in house?
2. Of these shows, how many include contemporary artists?
3. How many of these shows include local and regional artists?
4. Does your institute host shows of contemporary, regional art? Where do these shows originate?
5. Does your institution purchase regional works for the permanent collection?
6. Are these works regularly on display?
7. What role does regional art play in your philosophy of audience development?
8. Do you believe institutions such as yours have a responsibility to show local and regional art? Please elucidate.

The Responses

Akron Art Museum

1. 1983/84: 75 - 85%
2. 90%
3. Since September 1981, 1 (small, 4 week) exhibition at all times and 1 major exhibition annually, others occasionally.
4. Yes. These shows originate with our staff.
5. Rarely
6. No
7. It is the policy of the Museum to display the best in regional, national, and international art.
8. It is our intention to display art which we judge to be excellent, and we are delighted that such art is created in our region and that it is a part of our exhibition program.

Butler Institute of American Art

1. 80%
2. 50%
3. 15 - 25
4. Yes - they are organized by Butler Institute of American Art.
5. Yes; primarily from juried exhibitions held at Butler Institute or from one person shows.
6. Periodic and regular display depending on a number of factors relating to space.
7. The Butler Institute has a rich history of supporting regional artists. Juried shows such as the *Art Artists Annual* (open to artists within a 50 mile radius of Youngstown), *Ohio Ceramic and Sculpture Show*, and the *Midyear Exhibition* are an excellent exhibition resources for the regional artist. Over the past two years we have initiated a "Regional Artists Exhibition Program" as a way of underlining this support. Through it over a dozen regional artists have been given one-person exhibitions.