

Oct. 23, 2004

HOUSTON CHRONICLE
REVIEW

'Perspectives @ 25' is all about changes

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The main event in Houston's art scene last week was the Contemporary Arts Museum's 25-hour reception for *Perspectives @ 25*, but two other worthy exhibits at other museums opened the same night (Oct. 15) that would qualify for the mission of CAM's Perspectives series — to show new directions by artists.

The gregarious reception at CAM attracted 2,234 visitors — about 100 times the norm. It featured hula lessons, tai chi instruction, a marching band, a poker game, birthday cake — and original art, lots of it. The approximate 100 works in video, sculpture, painting and other media represent 77 artists, both famous and not, who have been highlighted by Perspectives shows in the past quarter-century.

THE FOLLIES

Installed in the hangarlike upper gallery, the celebratory exhibition is messy, a visual cacophony of size, style, color, medium; it's also of huge energy, powered by the sheer quantity of work and variety of expressions and formats. For some visitors it will be a walk down memory lane; for others, it could prove a revelation.

Sometimes, the work on view was presented in the original exhibit. One example is Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, small black-and-white photographs with which the artist first made her name in the art world. They date to 1981, when the CAM exhibited them as her first museum show. From that same season is Melissa Miller's lush *Anticipation* with its painterly bears. Also, Robert Rauschenberg lent his "squeaky mattress" — a prop from *Map Room II* (1965) that was included in the CAM's 1984 show of his performance works.

On the other hand, several artists are represented by new work that is quite different. Consider Al Souza's *The Peaceful Kingdom* (1998), a monumental puzzle piece that is far more compelling than the aqueous paintings he exhibited a decade ago.

JOE MANCUSO: PARTICLES

Also, new black-and-white drawings by James Drake and Robert Longo, artists who exhibited drawings in the 1980s, will wow you now.

Drake's enormous *City of Tells (With Signs Following)*, is similar in medium and intensity, as well as the moral stance he took in works 15 years ago, but this new charcoal drawing is more technically and spiritually ambitious. Longo's powerful *Untitled (Little Reef)*, of a crashing wave, is vital, unlike the stilted and flat works from the *Men in the City* series he exhibited in 1986.

"We didn't want to rehash history," said CAM director Marti Mayo. "We thought it more advantageous to show different work, and often stronger work."

The exhibit as a whole feels like a stone skipped across the water — it jumps, skims, glides and, sometimes, it sinks. That's the way contemporary art is in general, and it's OK.

New directions

The receptions for David Aylsworth at Inman Gallery and Joe Mancuso at Barbara Davis were quieter (and of much shorter in duration), but both artists exhibited paintings that signal shifts in approach and format.

Mancuso, who is better known as a sculptor, used an eyedropper to construct images — including carnations and the facade of Notre Dame Cathedral — in painstaking, obsessive pointillism. The support is newspaper on canvas, the canvas providing stability and the newspaper a chromatic ground for the droplets of white and pale shades of pink, blue and sand tones that shape the image.

It's easy to become lost in the dense surfaces. Seen close up, they are a chaotic dance of colored dots. From a distance, petals and details of the Gothic architecture become visible, like lace patterns on a colored cloth.

The paintings are rigorously constructed, from the gridlike format provided by the newspaper ground to the exact placement of each paint drop. The cold, almost clinical remove required to execute such precise images is subverted by the sensuality of the end result.

In the moment

Aylsworth's *The Follies* series is less about the Broadway musicals the name implies than about shape and color. His brushwork is loose and liquid in a palette that favors the red to orange range of the spectrum. Ovals, curving V shapes, and capsule forms seem to float against the canvas, bumping and sometimes invading one another, creating different hues and perceptual depth.

He's written the titles on the heavy frames of the smaller compositions — the large works are unframed — a conceit that serves him well to suggest his mood, if not necessarily the "content" of the animated abstraction, at the moment of its making.