

Fictive fellows

By Kate Dobbs Ariail

New Works Fellowships Northern Telecom. on view at Raleigh's City Gallery, seems unlikely to raise the hackles of the art-haters. It's a pretty well-behaved show, though I suppose someone might go off about the gowns painted as breasts in Martin Johnson's piece, *HESHE UNIS*.

The jurors who chose the first three recipients of the \$10,000 grants surely didn't pick any Andres Serrano types. (Serrano, whose *Piss Christ* caused such a furor, was a winner of the corporate-sponsored, now-defunct, Award in the Visual Arts.) While all three fellows, Martin Johnson, Lynn Marshall-Linnemeier and David Szafranski, are intent on conveying something of the true nature of our society and its symbols, none is ruthless in pursuit of that goal.

Of the three groups of work, the most affecting is Marshall-Linnemeier's. While the exhibition includes some of her acrylics on canvas, it is with the "illuminated" photographs that Marshall-Linnemeier works her magic. In fact, magic is one of her subjects: the magic of family, of spirit: the transformative magic of simply looking at something a different way.

In her six-piece series, *The Annotated Topsy*, a group of large painted photographs with accompanying text, the artist re-views Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous character from the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The "good" Topsy is shown standing still, dressed up like a white lady; the "bad" Topsy retains her Africanness. This series is a brilliant, if non-confrontational, critique not just of 19th-century views on race, but of those of many 20th-century Americans.

I found Marshall-Linnemeier's *The Family Jewels* series even more affecting. This 12-piece series is like a book: Each piece consists of two "pages," with text on the left and an image on the right. The story opens with a lost-looking woman finding a book in the park. The images that follow ostensibly come from that book: scenes shown and stories told with poetic economy. We see her parents' wedding; her own babyhood; her sisters; a memorial to a child killed by "greedy traffic."

The series' pervasive sense of love and unfocused melancholy becomes explicit in a panel accompanying a photograph of seven elders. "I sometimes wonder," it says, "if I could fill their shoes should they die before

me." The word "me" is inscribed on a tombstone; empty red shoes rest beneath. This piece, and the whole series, expresses a strong and tender connectedness to family that I found heart-wrenching, and a humbleness that I found breathtaking.

Martin Johnson's work can be breathtaking, too, in a different way. More like going around a little too long on one of those carnival rides that turns you every which way, while below you midway scenes glint and blur: a great fictive necklace of true Americana.

Johnson puts everything in his big sculptures and installations. I mean everything—I won't even start to list it. His manic pop-culture accretions are held together in sturdy frames and towers that merely amplify the chaos, accentuate the randomness. They have an all-overness that puts Jackson Pollock to shame.

They're funny, too, in a mordant kind of way. The individual items and their silly juxtapositions are hilarious. But it gets harder to laugh as the sea of gaudy trash swirls around you.

The third fellowship artist, David Szafranski, is also concerned with the materials of popular culture, but in a minimalist fashion. Szafranski is a man of many ideas, but his works fail where Johnson's and Marshall-Linnemeier's succeed, because while he can tell us his thoughts, he cannot show us.

Szafranski's four pieces in this exhibition are made of large-scale, flexible linear elements woven in simple structures and fixed to large stretchers (88 inches square). Szafranski uses materials such as lawn-chair webbing, flocked Christmas ribbon, movie tickets and seat-belt banding—but only one thing at a time. Each piece is made of a single type of material. While this certainly relates the work



Transformative magic: Lynn Marshall-Linnemeier, *The Annotated Topsy Series: #5, Salvation*

to traditions of modernist abstraction—such as the monochrome, all-over composition—it can, with equally validity, be understood as boring.

In his catalogue statement, the artist asserts that "by arrogating the square, the grid, and the woven repetitive pattern, I am able to refocus attention on some of the issues regarding hand-crafted versus mechanically made forms." He does not say what these issues are, but perhaps one is quality-control.

Szafranski has not been able to completely control his materials. With the exception of *Admit One*, the surfaces vary—webs sag, warps arc out of true, intervals between elements differ. Since part of the power in a woven structure or a repetitive pattern comes from its sameness, Szafranski's technical difficulties undermine his attempts to create the "hypnotic" surface he desires. Nor is he able to evoke the ironies and absurdities of the mediated, commercialized world that he writes about so well, even though he adopts one of advertising's favored techniques—just tell 'em whatever you want 'em to believe.

Is It Fear or Desire, made of red flocked ribbon, purports to have a surface "intensely seductive and visually addictive." Szafranski claims the piece is a "visual analogue" to the messages encouraging spending during the Christmas shopping "period of our mass psychosis."

Well now. All this reminds me of the old Jimmy Driftwood song about scoundrel politicians: Just because you said it doesn't make it so. Giving an artwork a fancy name doesn't make it mean anything. ■

NEW WORKS FELLOWSHIPS: NORTHERN TELECOM

Hanging through Oct. 29. City Gallery of Contemporary Art, 220 S. Blount St., Raleigh, 839-2077. Tuesday-Saturday 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Sunday, 1-5 p.m.