

RALEIGH

If the New Works Fellowships project and exhibition at the City Gallery of Contemporary Art was intended to gloss the possibilities and problems for art in the '90s, it is eminently successful.

ART Actually, that's a lot of weight for one show featuring three mid-career artists, but David Szafranski, Martin Johnson and Lynn Marshall-Linnemeier provide a glimpse of the varying directions art has taken in the 1990s — post post-modernism, if you will.

Johnson takes the predictably postmodern path of gathering, arranging and altering the detritus of American kitsch. It's High 1980s.

Szafranski, melding minimalism, op art, pattern painting and social investigation, makes a future from the best of the recent past.

Marshall-Linnemeier uses photography, paint and text to spin social comment from personal narrative, but she takes both beyond the familiar regions explored by such predecessors as Miriam Shapiro and Faith Ringgold.

Sponsored by Northern Telecom, the fellowship program culminates in this show and a fine, spiral bound catalog with essays that round up the usual art-critical suspects to explicate these diverse bodies of work. Writing about Johnson, critic Donald Kuspit touches on sources ranging from Fitzgerald and Duchamp to the Joker of "Batman" fame and Humpty Dumpty.

Kuspit suggests Johnson tries to put the shattered Humpty of American dreams back together again, but a more apt analogy may be the reassembling of a smashed airliner — all the pieces hung on a framework, more or less in proper sequence, but all mangled and inoperable.

On large two- or three-dimensional frames, Johnson hangs toys, clothes, pictures, frames, flags and various fragments of kitsch, some altered, some not, sometimes in anarchic jumbles, sometimes in kaleidoscopic patterns. Toothy grins recur, as do adolescent sexual images.

Surprise: "Johnson's message is that the American dream of freedom and plenty is in psychic fact an insane nightmare," writes Kuspit. Wow.

Szafranski has a much more refreshing take on the orderly inanity of American culture, one

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that quotes from such a variety of postwar sources that it seems to have no reference point at all. On large stretcher frames he weaves strips and tapes. "Keep This Coupon," for instance, is a tartan of "Admit One" and two-piece context tickets, those familiar chits of charity raffles and signs of our abiding faith in chance.

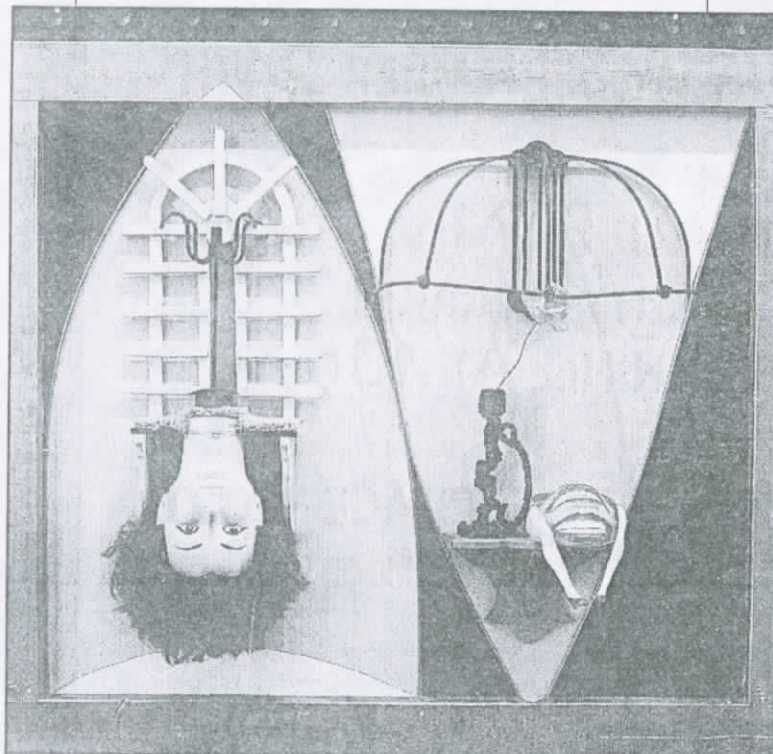
"High Visibility Barrier" is a woven network of the plastic ribbon used to cane patio chairs. Yellow with a black stripe in the center, it forms a dizzy pattern of vertical and horizontal dashes that bespeaks a sort of warning that is antithetical to the recreational uses the material usually serves.

Marshall-Linnemeier's is the most engaging and layered work here. Digging into personal and family history, as well as the troubled history of African Americans, she manipulates her portrait photographs and counterpoints them with deceptively simple texts.

The series "The Family Jewels" pairs her treated photos with golden, handwritten inscriptions to tell a family story, purportedly to a woman who sits on a bench and finds a book. This rubric simultaneously implicates the viewer as a participant (the woman on the bench) and universalizes the family narrative. It takes the story out of personal context without rendering it impersonal.

"The Annotated Topsy" series is a powerful reclamation of African American experience from a defining white viewpoint. Marshall-Linnemeier uses portraits of a model and of herself to re-imagine Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Topsy was the slave girl given to an abolitionist Northern girl who tries to rehabilitate her. Marshall-Linnemeier identifies the "bad" Topsy, the one who destroys her doll, as not so bad after all, casting her in the image of an African spirit.

The jurors for "New Works" were Peter d'Agostino, artist, communications professor and co-director of the Hypermedia Laboratory at Temple University; Mitchell Kahan, director of the Akron Art Museum; Karen Moss, an independent curator and consultant at the Santa Monica Museum; and Kristine Stiles, artist and assistant professor of art and art history at Duke University. They've assembled a show that is more than its parts, unofficially surveying the state of art.



It's High 1980s with Martin Johnson's 'Forty-Four Four by Fours' (1991-93), a mixed media work.

Focusing on three midcareer artists, 'New Works' offers a view of what's new, and not-so-new, on the contemporary scene.

What: "New Works Fellowships: Northern Telecom"
 Where: City Gallery of Contemporary Art, 220 S. Blount St., Raleigh.
 When: Tuesday-Saturday 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tours Fridays at noon. Through Oct. 29.
 Call: 839-2077.



Lynn Marshall-Linnemeier digs into the history of African Americans with 'Journey III: The Chant' (1994) and other works.