

Household Media Virginia Beach Arts Center

In the transition from Laurel Quenberg's *Journey Box* in December to the polyglot group involved in the current show, *Household Media*, the Virginia Beach Arts Center has gone from the sublime to the ridiculous. Maybe it's the theme; maybe it's the assortment of feeble jokes; maybe it's the preponderance of sloppy work that threatens to overwhelm the good. Maybe I'm being too serious about it all, but a show that promised to be innovative, even fun, wound up — with a few exceptions — shrill, cluttered, and empty.

The theme — ordinary household objects as material for art — is a venerable one, stretching back to the Dadaists. Hannah Hoch's witty collage of illustrations from cheap journals and newspapers, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* of 1919, is a small paradigm in this "genre." But the pitfall of the theme can be seen in this show all too often, resembling the approach of an old neighbor of mine who tossed the leftovers from a week's meals into the kitchen sink for a "salad," an unappetizing review of indiscriminate creativity.

Given the theme, assemblage was inevitable; if "found objects" are prescribed, very little but this method can suffice (a highly favored one, by the way, among the self-dispossessed artists). In fact, this area has a large number of assemblagists, most of whom are somehow connected to a core group at Old Dominion University. Three of the women (two directly and one indirectly involved with the U-crowd) are in this show — Anne Bousquet (better represented in the one-woman show at the U.S. Credit Corp. also on view this month), Katherine Huntoon, and Arleen Cohen. The former pair evidence a typical one-joke approach, and it's an in-joke bred by their evolution in an exclusive group. Most viewers won't get the full impact — or will be repelled by the underlying bitterness expressed in a couple of the pieces. At least Cohen hasn't exhibited her too familiar gee-whiz spacey paintings, but she's not much more convincing at ironic constructions than she is a crackpotology.

The good work in the show is certainly humorous, but it's got a disconnected feel, a sense of free-floating wit that is impersonal and clever. Karyl Sisson's innovative objects constructed of clothespins combine formal control with imagination, resulting in a group of strikingly elegant pseudo-vessels that seemingly would fold up for storage. Perhaps because they are so simple, so witty, these are the outstanding objects in the exhibition, free of bluster, cant, or archness.

Martin Johnson has chosen a number of rhoplex saturated objects whose vague geometries point up more formal concerns than one would expect from such an energetic and prolific artist. His works' origins in reality, with the exception of a piece incorporating a hideously funny 3-D "reproduction" of the Last Supper, are submerged. They resemble rebuses, full of obscured references to sources both inside the art world — and in their creator's out-of-bounds aesthetic. Johnson may seem wild-and-crazy but he's canny like a fox.

Lynn Sward and Bob Sites both contribute historicist jokes: Sward's festooned *Broomba* comes complete with documentation, her swipe at (and homage to) the recent African Masterpieces show at the Chrysler, and the latter utilizes his growing on-site knowledge of Italian Mannerism in *Grotesque*, a "copy" of Romano's incidental demonic heads at the Palazzo del Te in Mantua. It is, natch, grotesque to the sensitive among us as well since the ground for the painting is indoor-outdoor carpet (not necessarily unique in an art world inhabited by Julian Schnabel, but funny nonetheless).

But, unfortunately, the overall impact of *Household Media* is reminiscent of Fibber McGee's closet. But go see for yourself; it runs through Feb. 3.

Virginia Beach Arts Center, 1711 Arctic Ave., VB. Open 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Mon.-Sat. and 1-4 p.m. Sun. 425-0000.